

O.H. 2097

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

GM Lordstown Project

Personal Experiences

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Shirley Torres

Interviewed By

Nekia Hilson

On

April 21, 2003

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Interviewee: Shirley Torres

Interviewer: Nekia Hilson

Subject: GM Lordstown

Date: April 21, 2003

H: This is an interview with Shirley Torres for the Youngstown State University Oral History Project on Lordstown Assembly Plant by Nekia Hilson at her home, on April 21st at 6 o'clock PM. Shirley, can you tell me where and when you born?

T: I was born in Mahoning county, Youngstown, St. Elizabeth Hospital on 11, the 25th of 55.

H: Can you tell me about your family?

T: Yes, both my parents are from Georgia, a little country town area outside of Atlanta, Georgia called [unknown].

H: Um, so you were raised in Youngstown though, is that correct?

T: Yes, I was raised in Youngstown. My parents both married in Georgia and came here and they been ever since.

H: Ok, what did your father do?

T: My father worked in the mill.

[Cell phone rings]

H: I asked you, what, um, what did your parents do which you were goin' up?

T: My father worked in Sheet and Tube, um, which was the largest employer at that time in the valley, and he also worked for Steel City Milling, which they delivered flour to different bakeries and other bakery stuff. He also owned a restaurant, Pumpkin and Lumpkin.

H: What was it like growing up in Youngstown?

T: Ah, it was very hard. We lived in the bottom of the east side and from there, we moved to the north side of Youngstown.

H: And what was your educational background?

T: I completed thirteen years of schooling counting kindy-garden.

H: At what school did you attend?

T: The Rayen High School.

H: Now what were your work experiences prior to Lordstown?

T: I was a preschool teacher at a daycare.

H: Now is this all you did? I've heard you worked in a nursing home also.

T: Yes I did. I worked in a nursing right after I graduated from high school and from there I decided I wanted to work with children, so I got a job as a daycare teacher where I went an got certification to teach with Head Start.

H: Now how did you get your job at Lordstown Assembly Plant?

T: While working as a daycare teacher they had applications and I took a application and the lady axed me to fill it out and I took it out at General Motors. This was in May 25th, 1978. I never will forget because when I took that application out, they hired me right then and there on the spot.

H: So did you start work that day?

T: I started work that day!

H: How has the hirin' process changed since you last were hired?

T: Well now they make you take a test. The physicals are quite basically the same. They give you, you know, test to see if you can bend and your fingers move and, you know, if you have a good back, and uh, if your knees are good. But um, also they give you a hearing test were they put you in this container-like, big container and you listen for sounds like you did when you were in school. But now they test you, written test, through outside contractors.

H: How do you feel about this written test that new hirers have to take?

T: Well I think, um, it's unfairly done. There's always a clique to somthin'. Nothin' is ever fair. Um, you have to work in groups and it was at one time if a person in your group didn't do certain things, then the whole group flunked the test.

H: And you mentioned that the people that are giving these tests are contractors. How do you feel personally about GM hiring outside contractors to come in and perform.

T: Um...

H: Such as security...

T: Well, they have to cut costs which ever way they can, of course. So if this is one of they ways, by outsourcing with the security system or the employment system, I understand. As long as it's limited to some degree.

H: How were you able to adjust working with children to going onto the assembly line? How were you able to adjust?

T: I was very hard, very hard. It's not the same thing at all. Although when I hired in 78 of May, I hired in inspection, which was quite a easy job. I, um, only work with an ink pen and a pad and I love that. So, even though I love workin' with the children, this was a higher paying job and was only with an ink pen and a pad, so it became easy.

H: No describe your first job at Lordstown.

T: I inspected the doors and, um, the pads on the door, the handles, the window cranks and, um, that was basically it.

H: Now my understanding those type of jobs were you just inspect, those are for the workers that have seniority. Now since you didn't have seniority, how where you able to obtain this job?

T: Because I hired in on that job. During that time when I hired in, they didn't have anyone that was workin' in the plant that wanted to do those jobs. So when I hired in, they put me right into inspection.

H: Are you currently Doing the same job?

T: No they took me out.

H: And why did they take you out?

T: Because, after they gave us these jobs and two or three years went by, the union felt like they wanted those jobs to go to higher paid, higher seniority people, so they got the jobs!

H: When you say seniority, what do you mean by seniority?

T: I mean those that have more than I had, my three years.

H: Your never jobs, what were your responsibilities for your next job?

[man talking in the background]

T: Pardon me?

H: Next job, what was your never job?

T: My next job was workin' on the line and I installed motors.

H: You installed motors?

T: Yes I did. Me and another operator.

H: Now, installing these motors and you being a woman, was that a problem for you being able to perform this job as a woman?

T: No, because basically you're expected to do just as good as a man out there and you have more men that cry than women. So it's not hard to perform the same duties.

H: Is there a lotta issues between males and females out there. Are there a lot of gender issues?

T: Uh, no, not as bad as it used to be. It seems to be better. You just have to roll with the punches, be able to take a joke, and uh, basically, smile and keep goin'.

H: Now what about sexual harassment?

T: You can find sexual harassment in there. It also depends on how the woman carries herself.

H: Now do you have a lotta women, you said carry themselves. Are there, what do you mean by carry themselves?

T: Well you have some women that wear the shorts, really short short and of course this is gonna attract certain words comin' out of guy's mouths. And you have some women and they wear the low cut shirts and this too can cause a bit of difficulty.

H: Now when you first started out at General Motors and you were an inspector, what kind of cars was GM producing?

T: I'm not sure. I cannot recall what type of car we were building at that time.

H: And what type of cars are you guys currently building?

T: The Sunfire, uh and another couple of cars. I'm not sure, but...

H: Can you describe a typical day at work?

T: Sure. You come to work. You punch in. You go over to your job. You get your gloves and your glasses. The whistle blows and the line starts movin'. I get on top of the carrier. I pull wires out. I put a munsoon in, which is a amplifier for the radio to beef 'em up. And I, um, screw 'em in as well as put 'em in which they can weigh five and fifteen pounds and then I get off the carrier, pull the wire out, and throw it in the trunk. Then you go onto the next car and you do this continuously until you get your first break which is at 1:30. And then you get your lunch break which is at 4:30. Unless the line stops for unforeseenable reason, you will do that job.

H: Now what do you say to people who feel that the workers out at GM do a monotonous job? They are constantly doin' the same thing over and over again.

T: Oh yes they are! They most certainly are doin' the same thing over and over. And this is day in and day out unless the line stops for some unforeseeable reason, you will perform your job if you wanna get that pay check.

H: Now do you feel this affects the body in any kinds way?

T: Sure it does! I have two herniated disks and a messed up knee. The knee is from getting on and off the carrier, which it has some torn cartilage in it and the back is from bending in the trunk which has two herniated disks.

H: Now what area do you work in?

T: I work in trim department. Trim 1.

H: And how is the atmosphere amongst the workers in the trim department?

T: Well when you first get there, everybody's happy, then as the day wears on, nobody's talkin' to nobody hardly. Then when it's time to go home, everybody's happy.

H: Now do you think the atmosphere for you personally is a little bit easier since you have your husband out there and then your daughter works next to you. Do you think that makes it a lot easier for you.

T: Most certainly it does! He comes over to see me on breaks, so I talk then. I even get tired of talkin' to my daughter who works with me.

H: Do you feel that working with your daughter out at GM has helped your relationship with your daughter and also your husband?

T: Uh, I have three children. They're all the same!

H: And how long has your daughter been working with you?

T: Um, for about a year.

H: And how long has your husband been working with you?

T: Um, we been workin' together for about twenty, twenty years.

H: Ok, now I'm under the impression that alotta relationships out at GM, that they occur out at GM. You meet somebody out at GM and you get married to them. Now is this the type of relationship you and your husband have?

T: Yes it is. We met, and we got married and we've been married twenty-two years.

H: Did you meet your husband out at the plant?

T: Yes I did.

H: How did you meet your husband?

T: He was walkin' down the isle way and we spoke to each other.

H: Ok. Lets just go back to when you first started workin' out at GM, did you encounter any type of, um, problems?

T: Yes I did.

H: Can you describe some of the issues you had?

T: Well there was one issue, we were workin' on the line and you know, you wear the little, you wear the shirts, you know, with no sleeves and the one guy was doin' a job and said, "Why I didn't black women shave under their arms. Usually they don't shave under their arms."

H: [Laughing] And what did you say to him?

T: I was shocked!

H: [Laughing] And what did you, what happened? What was the out come of that incident?

T: There was no outcome. There was nuth, I was just shocked. I was just left speechless.

H: You never reported it to management?

T: Never, report to management, management had a problem themselves. I had my second child, uh, during the time I was employed at GM and I we put into the seat department to lift seats in the cushion room and when I went to pick the seats, they would sit on my stomach. So when I told the supervisor that the seats were being picked up on my stomach, he told me his finger hurted.

H: And what happened? Did you continue to stay in the seating department?

T: No, I left. My doctor took me out because the foreman told me his finger hurted.

H: Now at this time, did you guys have labor reps?

T: Yes we did and the union wanted me to stay there and fight it, but at that time, when you're pregnant, you're not yourself anyway. Your whole attitude changes and I just didn't have the strength in me to fight.

H: Now do a lotta women who are pregnant continue to work out at GM?

T: Yes they do and some don't do anything and some do hard jobs.

H: Now has this changed since you been down, since you been...

T: Well, they had lawsuit against it after I had my child and things have changed now. They are better than what they were. But, as usual, the case's always, who you know.

H: Now you were talkin' about labor. How is the relationship between labor management and, um, employees? How is their relationship?

T: Between labor?

H: And employees, um, it's only what you make it. If uh, you can get along and they don't have a gripe with you, you're okay. Sometimes you get a supervisor with a bad

attitude and then that makes it rough for the employee and sometimes you get an employee with a bad attitude and then that makes it, you know, rough for themselves.

H: Have you seen really, have you seen labor relations change over time?

T: Sure I have! I've seen 'em change they're better than what they used to be, there's still always room for improvement.

H: Have you yourself ever encounter an incident where you had to count, depend on labor to step in?

T: Yes I have. I, um, most recently had a supervisor who, um, was real nasty. We had a team meeting and she handed out papers to, for everyone to sign and when it came for me to sign the papers, she cut the light out on me.

H: And how did you resolve this incident?

T: I put in a call for the discrimination guy and he came and they removed her from the area because she had a history of harassing and being discriminating toward people of color.

H: So how affective do you feel the local union representatives are?

T: I feel if it wasn't a union, that there would be a lot worse issues than there are today.

H: Now you mentioned that um, some of the supervisors don't relate with the workers well. I know during the 70s, so of the plant supervisors were called, um, Gestapo.

T: I have no idea about that. I've never heard of that, but I do know that some of them walk around when I hired in 78 just as if they signed my paycheck and they didn't. I know that, um, it was a difficult time because they had a wildcat strike and I had heard

about it, uh, durin' the time, um, when I was in, uh, school. But, uh, because of that, I had heard that was shootings durin' the strike. I was scared, but I over came that and got the job there. So I basically, um, see alotta changes, but still there's so much room for more.

H: Now you mentioned the wildcat strike. Do you recall any other strikes that GM encountered?

T: They had little strikes that were off the record. Basically, I think one we were down, we were all out of work for maybe a couple of days, you know that maybe the media didn't make such a big deal about. Uh, it was basically were, um, maybe people walked off the line, which is a wildcat strike, and then, uh, there was just a not enough people to run, so they would tell everybody just go on home. And then a day or so would go by and we'd be back on the job.

H: Now what about the strike that occurred in 92? Can you recall that strike?

T: Um, that may be the one I'm talkin' about.

H: Oh, okay. Now do you remember the van plant?

T: Um, yes, I remember the van plant. I only worked over there a couple of times. That was not my, uh, plant. I'm from the car plant, but, at times you could get sent over to the truck plant to perform some duties.

H: Now lets talk about safety measures out at GM. Do you feel that GM has become safer compared to when you first started working out there to now?

T: Uh, yes. They are safer, but here again, there's always room for improvements. Um, right now, say for example, um we did have this back in 78, but if blood comes down the line, they have whole crew that comes in along with security and you're not

allowed to touch the car. And they have to tell you so that you don't perform your job until this, uh, blood is cleaned up along with security. You're not to, um, do the job on the car, no far, no, doesn't care how far it gets down in the plant. And usually it takes them, oh, I would say about, um, twenty minutes to clean up a car.

H: Have you ever heard of anyone dying in the plant or getting hurt?

T: Yes I have. Uh, I was employed in the plant back when the guy here this last death were, uh, one of the paint furnaces that was sittin' on top in the paint department, on top of the roof area where they would go up there and clean 'em out, blew up and killed 'em. In fact from what I understand it cut off his neck almost.

H: How did the workers take the news of someone dying out there? What was the atmosphere after this?

T: Well, it was very hard because one thing the company will not tell you exactly where the accident happened at. Where my job was located at in trim department, I, it was right next to my job, over my job, up above our job. My job was located next to the wall where Alpo is. Alpo is where the incident occurred, but on the roof of Alpo. So therefore, it was almost over our heads and when we came back to work, we could smell the new paint, new, like the smell of fire because everything had to be started all over again, new furnaces and stuff. So therefore, you could smell, but, uh, the company just didn't tell you, but um, General Motors is such a, uh, Lordstown's such a little town of its own, the plant, that the word got around and you knew where the accident had happened.

H: Have you seen GM's benefits change over time?

T: Yes the benefits have changed. They went to a, um, three tier system. You have your traditional insurance, you have your HMO, and you have your PPO.

H: And what do most workers tend to use?

T: Well, they tend to use the HMO because they're your, uh, doctor bills are pay. With your traditional, you had to pay your own payment, there was no co-payment. So if your doctor's appointment cost you \$65, \$65 is what you pay. But with HMO, if they were preferred doctor, you had no out of pocket co-payment to make. If you're PPO, you have, uh, \$20 out of pocket deductible that you would have to pay.

H: Now I understand GM has also implemented Quality of Life Programs. They also have another program were you can take the option of going to college and they pay for this program. Did they have this when you first started out at GM?

T: No, they, I'm not sure. I don't think they did. But they have it now and they have a care, elderly care program because a lot of them employees out there, um, their parents are at the age were they have to give them assisted living. So General Motors does have a program that even caters to the employee's parents as well as to the employee's children and, uh, etc.

H: Just to wrap things up, what types of renovations are being made currently to the assembly line?

T: Uh, well, out in the parking lot, as you enter from the fab plant to the car plant they're under construction. All that's under construction right now. Where the employees are not allowed to enter into that area where as we used to go back there. So they are, um are getting ready this new, uh, car that we're supposed to get, so it is alotta construction goin' on.

H: And what's the mood about getting the new car plant? How do workers feel about that?

T: Well, of course we're very happy because, uh, we need jobs here in this valley and when it comes to havin' a job, you want your job to be there, so we're very excited about the new car coming. We hope that it sells so that, um, the jobs will be more to come to the valley.

H: And what advice do you have for new comers coming into the plant?

T: Um, go to school, go to school. Use that education, because, um, from what we understand about the new car it's not gonna take that many people to build it even though you'll have alotta people to retire that is older seniority. Uh, if they bring in any new people here, you're not guarantee an income until you have ten years or more, so therefore, if you get laid-off before then, uh, there's a situation, a problem, you'd have. I would say get an education.

H: And, um, you mentioned that the jobs aren't guarantees and I know you have new technology comin' into the work force. How does the workers, or how do the workers feel about robots being introduced?

T: We naturally it was exciting for us in the beginning to see these robots. Um, and they are. They are very exciting, but here once again, you're eliminated the workers and they take the jobs away, so, but everyone has to modernize. Even at home when you run your household, you have to modernize that, you know, cut corners where you can. Where your insurance my go up on your car, you want it cheaper so look for another insurance company. Same thing with these robots. General Motors is proceeding on with high technology and the employees have to be ready for this.

H: Now what happens if an employee gets hurt out at GM? What measures does the employee have to do or where do they go?

T: Uh well, if an employee get hurt he has to file a claim right then and there he has to go to medical and file a claim that he was hurt, an incident report. After the incident report, he's to report to his own doctor as well as to the plant doctor if the injury consistivly bothers him.

H: So there's an in-house medical in the plant?

T: Yes there is a medical plant in a medical department in the plant. Staffed with a doctor and nurses.

H: Is there anything you would like to add to the interview before we wrap thinks up?

T: Well, we also have an emergency care system that responds because we've had alotta heart attacks out there because people will drop dead on the line because of the speed or over vigorously working constantly or because of their age. Um, they have an ambulance that's parked by the medical department in the rear of the building at all times on all three shifts because of the medical problems out there. The injuries that occur and the heart attacks which is one of the number one problems.

H: And lastly, do you see a future for GM?

T: Well yes! General Motors has lost share in the market, but unlike the steel mills, I think that they've learned. Because in the beginning Sheet and Tube was on of the biggest employees of this valley. I think and believe that General Motors has learned that they want to exist and to stay in the market. That's why they have invested in other this other than automobiles such as loan companies, um, stocks, um, other companies. They, General Motors is thriving. Not just in automobile industry. So I do believe that GM will be around a while.

H: And how do you feel about GM building plants in Mexico and abroad?

T: Well...

H: For cheaper labor.

T: It's unfair because the, uh, the union people from Mexico, uh, I don't wanna call them union people because they may have been just employees that were tryin' to get a union started there, but they visited our plant and they had a lotta health and safety issues with General Motors in Mexico. They had other problems with them there as well as wages. They wanted to get good paid wages as well.

[end of side one]

H: How do you feel about a woman being the new general manager compared to Herman [unknown]. How do you feel about Maureen?

T: Herman [unknown] was visible. You saw him on the floor. As they say about women, we're so nosey. Maureen is twice as much visible.

H: So do you fell this is a good thing?

T: It's a good thing, as Martha Stewart can say.

H: Ok. Is there anything else you'd like to add to the interview?

T: Just that I hope that General Motors continues thrive and thank you YSU for bein' interested in General Motors.

H: Okay, at this time I want to thank you for takin' to out your busy schedule for this interview and you have a good day.

[End of Interview]

I HAVE READ AND EDITED THE INTERVIEW AND, BY MY SIGNATURE,
INDICATE THAT IT IS APPROVED.

Shirley Jones
SIGNATURE

5/11/04
DATE