

Voices of Feminism Oral History Project

Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College
Northampton, MA

LINDA CHAVEZ-THOMPSON

interviewed by

KATHLEEN BANKS NUTTER

February 9–10, 2004

Washington, D.C.

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Narrator

Linda Chavez-Thompson was born August 3, 1944, in Lubbock, Texas, one of eight children born to Felipe and Genoveva Chavez; her father worked as a cotton sharecropper. She joined her parents in the cotton fields at the age of ten, quit school at 16 and went to work. Married for the first time at age 20 to Jose Luz Ramirez, she continued working as a domestic and had two children. In 1967, at the age of 23, she went to work for the Laborers' International Union and served as the secretary for the Lubbock local and, as the only Spanish-speaking union officer, represented all the Hispanic American workers within the local. Four years later she went to work for the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees Union (AFSCME) in San Antonio and rose through the ranks to be international vice-president (1988–96). In 1995 Chavez-Thompson was elected executive vice-president (third-ranking officer) of the AFL-CIO, the first woman and the first person of color to hold such a high office within the AFL-CIO; she was re-elected in 1997 and in 2001. She also serves as a vice-chair of the Democratic National Committee and an executive committee member of the Congressional Hispanic Caucus Institute. She married for a second time in 1985 to Robert Thompson, now deceased.

Interviewer

Kathleen Banks Nutter was for many years a reference archivist at the Sophia Smith Collection. She is currently adjunct faculty at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York City. She is the author of *'The Necessity of Organization': Mary Kenney O'Sullivan and Trade Unionism for Women, 1892–1912* (Garland, 1999).

Abstract

The oral history focuses on the various phases of Chavez-Thompson's life but is especially strong on her union activities, both as an organizer and as a union leader.

Restrictions

None

Format

Interview recorded on miniDV using Sony Digital Camcorder DSR-PDX10. Four 63-minute tapes.

Transcript

Transcribed by Luann Jette. Audited for accuracy and edited for clarity by Kathleen Banks Nutter. Reviewed and approved by Linda Chavez-Thompson.

Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

Video Recording

Bibliography: Chavez-Thompson, Linda. Interview by Kathleen Banks Nutter. Video recording, February 9–10, 2004. Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection. **Footnote:** Linda Chavez-Thompson, interview by Kathleen Banks Nutter, video recording, February 9, 2004, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, tape 3.

Transcript

Bibliography: Chavez-Thompson, Linda. Interview by Kathleen Banks Nutter. Transcript of video recording, February 9–10, 2004. Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection. **Footnote:** Linda Chavez-Thompson, interview by Kathleen Banks Nutter, transcript of video recording, February 9, 2004, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, pp. 22–24.

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Transcript of interview conducted FEBRUARY 9, 2004, with:

LINDA CHAVEZ-THOMPSON

at: AFL-CIO Headquarters, Washington, DC

by: KATHLEEN BANKS NUTTER

BANKS NUTTER: Thank you so much. I have spoken to many women in the labor movement at various stages and I feel I've gone right to the top. We've started by asking folks a little bit about their background and their childhood. I've read a bit about you and I guess my first question is if you can tell me a little bit about your parents and their values and politics and your childhood, your religion. What was your home setting?

CHAVEZ-THOMPSON: Well, I'm not going to do what George Jefferson does, you know, back in the days when I was a cotton picker and that stuff, but some of that does take place. My parents were, of course, first-generation American. I happen to be second generation. My grandparents, both sets, came from Mexico during the Revolutionary War of 1910. But my father managed to get up to the fifth grade, as far as his education, then of course he left after the fifth grade and started working.

My mother managed to get through the second grade and because they were migrant workers, rather, my grandparents on my mother's side were migrant workers, they took the kids out of school and she never made it back. So, my mother had limited English-speaking abilities, although she did write Spanish. In other words, her main language all her life was Spanish. My father learned a little more [English] and because he had to deal with the boss man on a cotton farm, he of course had a more fluent capacity as far as English was concerned.

I'm one of eight children. Their oldest daughter, my oldest sister was raised by my grandparents because when my mother had her, she almost immediately got pregnant with my other sister and had a very bad pregnancy. So my grandparents decided to take care of the older child. And after my mother got well, it was very hard for them to let go, and so my older sister did end up getting raised by my grandparents on my father's side.

My father was a very hardworking man. If you are a cotton sharecropper, if you work on a farm and the deal you make with the

farmer is that you get a certain amount of acreage of cotton, and anything that comes out of that is going to be yours. In other words, whatever price we managed to sell the cotton at the cotton gin was what my father ended up with as his bonus, or his payment for that year in addition to his salary weekly. And I remember one time knowing that my father used to get thirty dollars a week. That's thirty dollars a week to support a family of nine. The seven of us kids and my parents. But we managed because it was no meat, lots of potatoes and eggs and beans and whatever we grew during the summertime in our little truck garden: okra, green beans, tomatoes, cucumbers. Those kinds of things that we were able to grow, we ate. So we ate very healthy during the summertime. And then my mother, of course, canned, so we were able to eat some things that she canned during the winter months.

At the age of 10, I remember, my father that year did not get an annual job of cotton sharecropper, so that summer was the first summer where he actually had to go out with my sister and some cousins and whatever, to weed cotton in West Texas. We call it hoeing cotton but it was weeding the cotton rows so that the weeds don't choke off the cotton plants. And I was 10 years old and they took me to see if just in case they could get me to work because it was just my dad, my older sister, my mother, and it was a crew of three, and me. And so he asked the man if he could put me to work and if he would pay me. And the guy said, yes, but that it would have to be thirty cents an hour versus the grownups were getting fifty cents an hour. And that's how I went to work. That was my very first job.

And the one thing my father always taught me was no matter what work you do, no matter what level of work that you do, you always do a good job. You always make sure that you do the best job. And he taught all of us, all of his children, a work ethic. In other words, work hard, do the job well, be proud of what you do, no matter what that job is. And in his estimation, it could be the lowest kind of work that you had to do, but if you did it well, be proud of that.

So for years, every summer after school, and school in Texas normally is the last day of May and it used to start up around the first of September, so you had June, July, and August that you worked in the fields, and that's exactly what I did. All of the summers up until I was 19 years of age, I worked in the cotton fields. And as the kids started growing up, the younger ones below me, as they got old enough, they ended up in the cotton fields as well. I think the only two that never did that were the two youngest of the family, because by that time, they were in high school and so they never got to work at that kind of work, but all the rest of us did. We had to hoe cotton during the summertime and we had to pick cotton during the wintertime when we could, because of course, up until the age of 15 I was in school. Past that age, my dad pulled me out. I could no longer go to school.

So, it was a situation where we made do with what we could. When you live on a cotton farm, it's not like you can get a summer job sacking groceries or cutting lawns, you know, cutting the grass on lawns in the neighborhood or anything of that nature. There's one kind of work in the summertime and that's weeding cotton and that's what we did. So, it was a happy childhood. We were poor. My mother made do with what she could.

Years ago, and you're probably too young to remember this, but years ago, they used to sell flour in 25-pound flour sacks. And if you were lucky enough and were able to buy two of them in the same pattern, because they used to come in all sorts of different patterns and colors and print material instead of just the white sack, and my mother got two, I'd get a dress. If she could only find one, I'd get a blouse. So she was able to sew and make us some clothes back in those days. So we made do. We were poor, we didn't have much, but we were happy, because we didn't know we were that poor. We just thought we were lacking a little bit but not that much.

My mother was a very patient woman and the only thing that she did which I would say I have a problem with, but she was taught that she was the wife. In other words, cook the meals, wash the clothes, take care of the kids, and that's what she was taught. That's what her mother was taught, and I'm sure her mother before her. I think — and I tell this sometimes when I make speeches to women's groups — that I think my mother was a closet feminist, because she never taught us that. My father thought we were getting taught to be just like she was brought up, but she never taught us that. In other words, she never said, "You are second banana to your husband." She taught us how to cook, she taught us how to sew, she taught us how to clean the house, you know, the things that girls are supposed to know. But she never said, "By the way, you're supposed to do everything and be anything that your husband wants you to be." So I tell people, I say, "I think my mother was a closet feminist and I think my father never found out about it." [laugh]

BANKS NUTTER: Why do you think that was? Why do you think she had a maybe unconscious sense?

CHAVEZ-THOMPSON: I think she wanted to break the cycle. I think in her way, it was her statement that her daughters not to have to be as compliant as she and her sisters were taught to be. In other words, you don't talk back to your husband, you don't disagree with your husband. You're only there because you're cooking the food and cleaning the clothes and cleaning the house and raising the kids. And I think to her, not teaching us to be subservient to our husbands was her own way of breaking that cycle, because all five girls and my three brothers — of course, the other thing was, she was never able to break through the taboo on boys, that they too had jobs to do in the house, that they too should pick up their clothes

and that they should learn to cook for themselves at some point, because my dad said, "Boys don't do that." And so she wasn't able, really, to break through. And it shows, because my brothers are spoiled rotten. I love them to pieces but they're used to having the wife do things for them. And I don't think a single one of them knows how to cook. Maybe the baby brother does, Tony. But the other two can boil water, and that's about it. But the younger one, I think, is a little more liberalized. He does more around the house, helps his wife, et cetera. But he's younger so he wasn't as much influenced by some of teachings of the Chavez family.

But it was a wonderful childhood. There were five girls, three boys. Four of the girls at home and then the three boys. And the three older girls were the three oldest. And then everybody stepladder after that. The youngest is nine years younger than the youngest boy, and there was a very big age difference, so she was and probably still is our baby out of the family. No matter how old she is, she's still the baby of the family.

BANKS NUTTER: Now, did religion play a part in your family?

CHAVEZ-THOMPSON: Very much so. Born and raised a Catholic and church every Sunday. Very few times would we miss church because it was a holy day of obligation? We had to go to church. And the only thing that would keep us from it was if we lived in a particular farm and it rained and the car would get stuck in the mud so we couldn't go out until it dried out so we wouldn't go to church on those Sundays. But any other time, we did go to church every Sunday. We took our catechism classes. We received all of our sacraments that were required: Communion, Confirmation, which are two of the things that you have to do, and then of course, most of us got married by the church but some of didn't, which didn't go over well with mom and dad.

But we had a very important part of our lives believing in the things that our church was teaching us. It lasted, for me, until I divorced my husband, and it didn't mean that I was living outside the church until I married the second time. And then, of course, I couldn't participate in the church activities because I was quote living in sin, as they say. This is the translation of living in sin. But no, Catholic teachings and still today, when my husband died, of course, I was able to come back to the church and receive the communion, et cetera, and so I, you know, did manage to come back to the church after my husband died about ten years ago, almost eleven years ago.

BANKS NUTTER: And what sort of values did you take away from the church that are still with you?

CHAVEZ-THOMPSON: I think more about my mother's faith than mine. My mother had a very, very deeply religious attitude in life, that God would take care of any

problems that her children had, that God would take care of her, as she had several illnesses before she passed away. And I think seeing that faith with my mother was probably a very influential part of me.

At the age of 16, I went to what they call a retreat, a three-day retreat, and I heard stories of women who had fallen and committed sins and repented and came back into the grace of God, and so it was one of those situations where I was influenced by my mother. She had a favorite saint, Saint Jude Thaddeus, which is sort of like the patron saint of the impossible. And that was her favorite saint. When she passed away, we asked that in lieu of flowers, that people would make a donation, and in front of the Catholic Church that she attended for over 25 years of her life, we set up a statue of St. Jude Thaddeus as a contribution to the church on behalf of my mother. So every time I go to Austin, Texas, and I visit the church, I visit the statue, and this is something that my mother had great faith in.

She said to me one time, she put my older sister's life into God's hands, because my sister had some very, very bad epilepsy attacks. A couple of times, we thought we'd lost her. So my mother said, in Spanish, "se la encomendi a Dios." I gave her into God's hands and prayed to St. Jude, prayed to God to make her well. And after the age of 20, the epilepsy went away, and mother always said, "My prayers were answered." So we believed my mother. I mean, because there was no medication. Back then, you just dealt with it, and we didn't have money for medication so, it just went away. My sister never had another epilepsy attack after the age of 20. Now, all of that could probably be explained by a doctor. You know, she outgrew it, she was eating the right foods. All of the things that a doctor could probably tell are the reasons, but for us, it was my Mom's miracle.

My youngest brother, the same thing. He was a very sickly child. Mother did the same thing. She did a pilgrimage to San Juan, Texas, which is very famous for a Virgin of San Juan. And she did the same thing. She commended him to God and [he's a] pretty sturdy, hefty fellow now, that's walking around and enjoying his life, his children, and grandchildren.

And again, it was Mother's faith, what she believed in. So we believed in Mother, and so we believed that these things could happen. We believed that miracles happened and that people could get well with prayer. I guess later on in life, we became a little bit more suspicious and a little bit more disbelieving — well, you know, this could be explained. It's a miracle but maybe medicine had something to do with it. But as long as my mother believed, we believed in her. And so religion was very much a part of our lives as we were growing up.

BANKS NUTTER: I can see why. Were there any other family members besides your parents who played an important role in your lives growing up? Grandparents, aunts, uncles?

CHAVEZ-THOMPSON: We had a very strict upbringing. I have to tell you a funny story. We weren't allowed to date. You didn't look at boys, you didn't talk to boys, you didn't smile at boys, and when I was 19, of course, I had been seeing someone and, behind my father's back — I think my mother knew, but we kept it from my father, and one day, I told them that this young man and his sponsors, because he didn't have parents, his sponsor means some grownup that would go on his behalf to ask for my hand in marriage. My dad went into a total panic. Total panic. He didn't know what to do. This was the first time he'd been confronted with something like this, so he took off. Instead of waiting for them, he took off to my grandfather's house to say, "What do I do? What do I say?" And so my grandfather gave him instructions, that he would tell these people who came that he would give them an answer in a month.

And the one problem at the time that everybody had was that the young man was ten years older than I was. He was 29, I was 19, and that caused great alarm and great concern in my family, that he was too old for me. But I was a pretty stubborn child. I said, "I want to marry and I want to do it right. I want to have a church wedding and hopefully everybody will go along with me." So, that's what my father did. He says, "I'll give you an answer in a month." And that whole month, my grandparents, my uncles, my aunts, my mother — not my father, my father was still a little punchy, he just didn't know what to do — they tried to convince me not to marry him. They said, "He's way past the age that you are. You're not going to have any fun. This is going to be a bad marriage, he's too old for you." On and on. And I said, "OK, then I'm going to elope."

So they finally gave permission. I got married, and my first husband and I were married for twenty years. We had two beautiful children. He's a great father. We divorced after twenty years, but I think it was a good call at that time.

And so, especially my grandfather, he kind of meddled. He kind of was the patriarch of the family, and still ruled the family. In other words, his sons still went to him for advice. His sons still said, "I'm thinking of buying a car, this is the kind of car that I want to buy." So Grandfather would say, "Well, that sounds like a good deal." So that was the approval. Some of us younger, more independent, liberal kids that were being raised, wondered, Why? But this was the custom in Mexico. This was a Mexican custom, that the patriarch of the family still ran the family, still helped in making the decisions for the family, even if that son was already married, and had kids, like my dad, had kids and everything, he still went to my grandfather.

BANKS NUTTER: For at least advice.

CHAVEZ-THOMPSON: At least advice, yes. But my father had a very strong work ethic. My grandparents did as well. My grandfather came from Mexico, as I said,

and he was one of those Mexicans at the time who was on the wrong side — the right side but at the time, the wrong side of the Revolution, so the Mexican government asked him to leave. So they crossed the border. They paid five dollars and they became United States citizens back in the early 1910s. And so, my grandfather finished high school, what you call high school over there and was very eloquent, spoke, read a lot, he was a very intelligent man, and I could never forget the fact that he said that I'm the only one that took after him.

He was an activist. He wrote letters to the editor, he would speak at the Fiesta held on the 16th of September which is the Mexican Independence Day and whenever they had a celebration, my grandfather went up there and he would give a speech on patriotism and the Mexicans and we owned Texas and so if anybody tells you to go home, tell them they need to go home. This was our country, you know, that kind of stuff. Very much a rebel. Very much an activist, and very much against being called a minority in the state of Texas, because he said, "We're not the minority, they are."

My nickname was "Mouth of the South" and [I was] the only one who ended up doing the same type of work — activism, unionism, you know. He was very proud of me. I ended up getting a name for myself. He would go to the church where we used to go to when we were children and brag about me. And I know all those people hate me. I just knew that they hated me because my grandfather would go over there and brag and show a newspaper clipping or something where'd I come out in the news in San Antonio, or because the local papers had news stories from around the state. They would show it in Lubbock and my grandfather would proudly tell everybody that Sunday at church about his granddaughter. And I told my sisters, "God, I'll never be able to show my face in that town again." Because of my grandfather. He just absolutely thought it was wonderful.

And it's a little bit like that in our family. My grandfather was an activist, my father was not. I'm an activist, my daughter is not. Somewhat. My granddaughter, she's going to be the "Mouth of the South" pretty soon, because she's the one who gives you her opinion and tells you why and wants to know what kind of problem you have with it. You know, she's very much a little leader already.

BANKS NUTTER: You must love that.

CHAVEZ-THOMPSON: I love that.

BANKS NUTTER: Now, what was it like growing up in West Texas in the 1940s, 50s, early 60s? Not as a minority, technically, or officially, but in reality in the American South, and the Civil Rights movement was starting in other parts of the South.

CHAVEZ-THOMPSON: Yes, there was discrimination. At the time I went to school, Mexican-Americans were integrated in the schools. We were never excluded, that I know of. My father went to an integrated school. But I still remember getting on the bus and the same bus would pick up some African American children and I remember, one of the first stops on that bus was to a little one-room school where all of the African American kids went, because they were not integrated into our school.

But we didn't quite receive the kind of education that we should have because the teachers didn't pay as much attention to the little Mexican kids, and so those that wanted to learn, learned. Those that didn't, there was no special attention to help them. There was no bilingual education. You went in cold on your first day of school and you were expected to know English and if you didn't know it, you were ridiculed.

But even as badly as we got treated or as bad as we learned or didn't learn, there was a third class of children. And I saw this, and I knew something was wrong but I didn't exactly know what it was. It was the migrant children. The children who came to pick cotton or to weed cotton or what have you. The teachers knew that those kids would only be in school for two or three months, and then the parents would move on to the next crop, whether it was going all the way to Michigan or points north of Texas. So those kids weren't going to be there very long, so those kids didn't get any attention. They were allowed to come into the school, they were allowed to try to learn what they could when they were there. But the teachers never made a special effort for them, because they were migrants and because they'd be gone by November. I mean, they started school in September, they'd be gone by the end of October, first of November, so they didn't have to worry about them. But I saw something there.

I also remember, and when you're a child, you can be very cruel, and I remember myself laughing at a little girl who brought tacos, bean tacos with sprinkles of bacon. My God, they sell for \$1.50 now and people just love them.

BANKS NUTTER: It's gourmet food.

CHAVEZ-THOMPSON: It's gourmet food but refried beans and potato and egg or, you know, those things that are just the cat's meow now, are what these kids brought to the cafeteria. Of course, we brought bologna sandwiches, because we had enough money to buy bread, and bring bologna sandwiches. We never brought tortillas. We never brought tortillas because they would laugh at us if we did. And so, I laughed along with the other kids at these kids who brought tacos because everybody knew you don't bring tacos to school. God, now, if you bring a taco, somebody'll fight you for it because it's now the thing to do.

But I saw the discrimination, I also saw within the farm that I lived, the cotton farm where I lived, I saw the treatment of the Mexicans who were brought in to do the heavy lifting, the bulk of the work when there was nobody else in the cotton fields, they did this work. It was the old Bracero program, where you literally brought in indentured slaves who came to work, whose living conditions were horrible. I remember on the ranch where we lived, there were some sheds made out of aluminum. Do you know how hot it can get in a shed with aluminum walls? It's horrible. And they lived in those conditions and they worked in those conditions and they had a tab at the little corner grocery store where everything is marked up, right? And the boss would pay their tab before he gave them their money, because they had to feed themselves. They didn't earn much but they had to feed themselves.

So I saw all these things as a child, and something was wrong. Something was wrong. I didn't know what it was, but something was wrong and I didn't like it, whether it was in school, how other kids were treated, whether it was on the cotton farm. We were just treated differently because we were persons of color. We were treated differently. We weren't given the same kind of service. We literally had to wait for all the white people to buy whatever they were buying with the cashier, and we had to stand back and go when there wasn't a white person around so that they could service us without a sneer or without a look down their nose at us, that type of thing. It was not blatant, but it was very subtle and you knew it. There was discrimination.

BANKS NUTTER: You said you left school at 15 and started working full-time at that point?

CHAVEZ-THOMPSON: Well, usually the weeding cotton ends around the end of September, early part of October, so that year I remember vividly when my father told me I wasn't going back to school. I cried and cried and cried that morning when the school bus came to get my younger brothers and sisters. And the reason was my dad couldn't afford to send five of us to school. My youngest brother got to be old enough to go to school so it was the four younger kids who got to go to school, because my dad could not afford five kids in school. So I was 15 and therefore I didn't need to go to school anymore. And back in those days, the thought was that girls didn't need an education, you know. They were going get married anyway. So they didn't need an education. So I cried and begged. I wanted to go back to school so bad, so bad. But it wasn't to be. The first day, I'm out there in the morning, weeding the cotton and here comes the school bus. I cried all day long. My eyes were so puffy, but my dad couldn't afford to send us, so I quit.

BANKS NUTTER: Now what was it — you were in public school?

CHAVEZ-THOMPSON: Public school.

BANKS NUTTER: Cost of clothing?

CHAVEZ-THOMPSON: Food. Food, clothing. Dad couldn't afford it. Not for five kids. And at thirty dollars a week, that didn't stretch much. And I told him, "I don't have to eat. I won't eat, you know. I don't have to eat. Or just give me a quarter." And a quarter would get me a soda and a bag of chips, potato chips. And that's all I wanted, it was just that quarter. Can you imagine? Back in those days, a quarter would get you a Coke and a bag of chips.

BANKS NUTTER: It doesn't get you anything now.

CHAVEZ-THOMPSON: It doesn't get you much. And so, the question was economics because I couldn't go to school. But when my brothers and sisters would bring their books home, although they were a lower grade, I would read, I would study. I would get my hands on a magazine. I would do whatever it was to keep learning. I wanted to keep learning. I didn't want to stop learning, and anything I could get my hands on to read, I would read it.

I self-taught myself how to read and write Spanish as well, because my dad used to get a lot of these magazines and I wanted to know what those magazines had to say, so slowly I began to put the words, the sounds of the words and what it looked like and I said, "Oh, I know what this word is." So I taught myself how to read Spanish, because I already knew the language. I just needed to know a little bit more how to read it. So I learned how to read it and write it, et cetera. But it was heartbreaking because there was just no way to send me to school.

What happened then was, once September rolls around, come October, there is no more field work. So that year, the wife of the owner of the farm said that if I wanted to, she would teach me how to clean houses, so that I could shop my skills around the cotton farms in the area, and that's what I did. I used to clean house for her once a week, and she showed me how to do everything perfectly. You know, scrub floors, toilet bowls, all the things I sort of knew but, you know, higher-class cleaning. And then I had work during the winter months cleaning houses. They would come and pick me up and come and drop me off and I would work, sometimes four, five, six hours a day, and by then, I was earning a dollar an hour. So this was a little income coming in.

My sister decided that she didn't like cleaning houses but she managed to get herself a job as a waitress in the little town close to us and we had an extra car so she went to work every day. And so she ended being a waitress, I ended up cleaning houses until I was 19 — I was 20 when I got married, that year.

But it was kind of difficult, because the greatest thing that I thought I could ever be was a clerk at Sears Roebuck. It was a dream job that someday they would see my talent and my ability and how well I spoke English and they would hire me as a clerk at Sears Roebuck. And I honestly thought that would be the nth degree of a job for me, because I

would be inside, I wouldn't have the weather, the cold, and the hot of summer out in the cotton fields ever again. And I never had my dream come true. But I did get a good job.

BANKS NUTTER: Were they all white clerks then?

CHAVEZ-THOMPSON: Oh yes, yes. But you know what? I didn't even think of it that way. I didn't even think of it that way. I just thought about my ability to speak and help but yes, they were all white people who worked in Sears.

BANKS NUTTER: You said that you did get married. Now did you stop working cleaning houses because you got married?

CHAVEZ-THOMPSON: I moved into the city. My future husband and then my husband worked as a laborer in the city's electrical department.

BANKS NUTTER: That city was?

CHAVEZ-THOMPSON: Lubbock, Texas. And so he had a good job. It didn't pay a lot but it paid a lot better than the cotton farm hand. So we moved from a little town called Idalou, Texas, which is about ten miles outside of Lubbock, so I moved into the big city, and I was now a city girl. But I got pregnant right away, almost within the month after I got married, I got pregnant, had a little girl. She was born a month premature. She weighed 4 pounds 11 ounces. Teeny little thing about this big. But I looked in the newspaper and saw where they needed somebody to clean houses and I knew how to clean houses. So I would leave her with one of my sisters-in-law and I'd find a job someplace and sometimes taking the bus. Every once in a while, I'd have the car, and I would clean houses. That was the one thing that I knew how to do. So that was basically what I was doing for about three years after I got married.

BANKS NUTTER: During that time, was there still hope to be that clerk at Sears? I mean, was there still a sense of —

CHAVEZ-THOMPSON: There was a sense of I wanted to be in a job that was a little better. I wanted to be not just a clerk. I wanted something that would allow me to dress up every day and go to work. And I got that opportunity with the union. An inside job. A secretarial job. And the way it happened was totally strange, but I always had it in the back of my mind that I wanted a white-collar job. I didn't want to work in the fields, I didn't want to clean houses anymore. I wanted a job that gave me a bit little more self-respect.

BANKS NUTTER: And so it was in 1967, I guess, that you went to work with a labor union — was it the International Laborers' Union?

CHAVEZ-THOMPSON: Yes.

BANKS NUTTER: Why then? How'd you get there?

CHAVEZ-THOMPSON: My uncle, my daddy's brother, lived out in another section of the city, outside the city limits, and he had a good Saturday-night, beer-drinking buddy, who just happened to be the business agent for the laborers' construction local in Lubbock. And every Saturday night, they would visit each other's homes, sit out in the car and drink beer. And the business agent was telling my uncle what problems he was having. He was a new business agent, had beaten the old business agent out of the position, got elected, and he was having problems because he didn't understand Spanish, and 60 percent of the local was Mexican-American. His secretary didn't understand one word. He didn't understand one word of Spanish, and communication was a problem, and he told my uncle, "I need a secretary who can speak Spanish, write it, read it." And my uncle said, "I have a niece who'd like to have a job, and why don't I have her interview with you?"

So the business agent asked me if I typed. Well, I didn't lie. I could type — two fingers on each hand — and so I was sitting in his office interviewing, when these men came in to get on the hiring hall list for the local, and they didn't speak a word of English. So, they saw me and asked me, would you help? And so I told him [the business agent] what they wanted. I was the interpreter. I facilitated the conversation. They signed on, they paid their initiation fee, and they were ready to go to work. So I was hired, because I showed my ability for just what he needed. Somebody that could be the go-between. And that's how my union career started.

I didn't know anything about unions. Not even the word union had ever come up for me. And here I was, in a union secretary job. He never asked me if I knew how to run a mimeograph machine, and I didn't know what a mimeograph machine was. I knew how to operate a calculator, I knew how to add, I knew how to type. But I slowly began to learn and then I began to learn even more, what a union was and how great that was, and the kind of money that people could earn was, like, "Wow." Big bucks. Five dollars an hour. That was a lot of money, especially when I was getting a \$1.40 an hour, and I was sending out people to work for five, six dollars an hour, depending on the job, depending on the skill that you had. It was — an eye opener. People had health insurance. People had a pension plan. My gosh, that's nice. A union does that. That's great.

But the more I learned, the more I wanted. The more I wanted to do. The more I wanted to learn. The more I wanted to be, other than a secretary. And a tornado helped. In 1970, three years after I'd gotten this job, a tornado hit downtown Lubbock, residential areas and the

Texas AFL-CIO needed a tornado relief coordinator and they couldn't get anybody who had full-time jobs to give up those jobs to do this for about three months.

And they asked me, and I said, "Sure." I already knew all the people in the community services, because when construction laborers don't work, there's no money coming in. If you work thirty hours or ten, or if it rained all week or whatever, you got to go someplace to get assistance. So I knew where all the churches had their food banks. Back then, it was the Community Chest or Community Fund, I can't remember the name of it, and I knew all the people there and how I could get their bills paid. I knew where the food banks were. I knew where they could get free clothes. I knew where they could get school supplies for their kids if it was around school time. So, I already knew that and that's basically what the tornado relief coordinator had to do, find places where the victims could get help.

And so I took the job for three months and I told people that was the end of it. I just did not see myself going back to an 8-5 job. I saw myself doing field work, and I didn't want to go back to being a secretary. I had that job waiting for me but I wanted to be more. And so, being the secretary of the construction local, I'd done everything. In fact, at one time when this business manager who had hired me was kicked out, for three months I ran the local. But I didn't get the pay, you know. I ran the local. I did everything that needed to be done. I returned the phone calls for the contractors. I looked at all of the what they call the Dodge reports, which is what jobs are coming to town, and I would go to the other business agents and find out when is this job going to open up, how many people they're going to need, you know, that kind of stuff. So I was actually doing the job of a business manager. Never got paid for it but they trusted that I knew what I was doing and I ran it. And then, of course, they put in another business agent soon thereafter so that he could get the money and he could get the job. But I loved it. I saw something different.

In the meantime, during those three years, some city employees, including my husband, decided they needed a union. So about a hundred of them came into our union. They hand paid their union dues because they didn't have dues check-off. And then I found out something even better. I loved representing public employees. And the business manager really didn't have any use for these people, because it was a totally different kind of work. And this business manager was into construction and he didn't know anything about city employment, didn't know what their rights were, grievance procedures, anything of that. So I learned it. In reality, I ended up being the assistant business manager, but I had the title of secretary and that's all that I was able to do, but I loved the work. At some point down the road, I ended up then going to work for the American Federation of State, County, and Municipal Employees [AFSCME].

BANKS NUTTER: I'm curious — the International Labor Union — was it primarily men who worked there?

CHAVEZ-THOMPSON: I never had a woman come in to get on the hiring hall, ever.

BANKS NUTTER: This was late 60s?

CHAVEZ-THOMPSON: It was in '67 through 1971.

BANKS NUTTER: Now, what about race there? You said you were the official or unofficial translator — was there evidence of racism that you remember at all?

CHAVEZ-THOMPSON: When I kept the books, I kept them as clean as I could, but there were instances where the business manager would supersede the list. If it was a job that was going to be there for a year, he'd make sure that his buddies would get into that job so that they'd have work for a year. I tried to keep a good list. A hiring hall list is as they come in, they go on the list, and as the jobs are needed, they come off the list. Even if they go out one day, they go to the bottom of the list, unfortunately. But I tried to keep that list so it was fair and equitable. I would make the phone calls and tell people you have to give me a good number, you have to make sure you have someone available if you don't have a telephone number, give me the number of the across-the-street neighbor, the next-door neighbor, and you have to assure me that that person is going to find you and tell you to call me back. I would try to do that and I'd try to be as fair as possible. I didn't care who came in. Black, brown, white, purple, polka dot. They could come in, sign, and I would try to do that.

But if the business manager was in the office, and some of his buddies came in, I saw it. He would give them the longer jobs than he would to the Mexican-Americans or to the blacks. When I handled it, and most of the time I handled it because a lot of the times, he was out in the field. But, yes, I saw the disparities on many occasions.

BANKS NUTTER: What were your thoughts at the time about that?

CHAVEZ-THOMPSON: Well, I thought it was very unfair and I think I opened my mouth one time too many to say that it was unfair. My father, at the age of 54, got to be too old to work on a farm. He couldn't take the dawn to dusk, seven days a week, so he moved into the city, I think my daughter was almost two, and he moved into the city in 1967 and he went to work as a custodian in one of the shopping malls in town. But of course, that paid zilch, and so, in 1969, I told him, "Dad, why don't you come work at the union? You can do laborer work." And he said, "Oh, no, I can't do that." I said, "But Dad," I said, "you and Uncle Joe and Uncle Manuel

built a house. You poured concrete. You nailed up walls. You put windows in. I mean, it's about you helping the carpenter, you're helping the electrician, you're helping, you know, the bricklayer." I said, "You're a helper. You can do it, Dad." He was scared. Absolutely scared. But in 1969, I got him a job at a construction job.

The business manager could be bad. He was a drunk and they finally caught him drinking during working hours, and I made the mistake of saying something about him, and this person went and told him. So, he comes in one day and fires me. And I go home and I called the people that were over him in Fort Worth and I told them what he was doing. I said, "I don't get all the money. He goes and collects dues, and he brings me back what he thinks I should put down in the books and then I have to give the workers dues stamps on their union book." Back in those days, a month's dues bought you a little stamp and you put it in your book. And so, he would just take stamps from me and put them in the books and never turn in the money. So I told them all of this, because I said, "That's not fair. And I've seen how he jumps people over and gives them jobs, and I explained what I've tried to do." Well, he ended up getting fired. That's the time I ended up being the business manager for three months. He ended up getting fired for it.

But my dad — I said something and the man called my father a name, and I stood up for my dad, and basically my dad was repeating what I'd already said about the man, that he was drunk and that he was stealing money. And so that got me fired. I had to walk home because I didn't have any money on me. I had to walk home, and that was a long, long walk to get home because I had no bus money. But it was a turning point for me. I had actually stood up for myself. I had actually said, "I'm going live on principle. I'm not going live by what somebody is doing and it's wrong and I'm not letting him get away with it."

So, I got my job back and I got a pay increase to boot, when they found out how little I was getting paid, and the business manager was gone. He was gone. I never even knew whatever happened to him after that. But there was disparity, there was discrimination. My dad felt it. I felt it. I don't know that my children have felt that discrimination. I don't think I've ever asked them, "Have you been discriminated against because you're Latino?" But there were a lot of race issues in that local union, and I tried not to do that but seeing it done was just very hard on me.

END DISC 1

DISC 2

BANKS NUTTER: So in 1971 you went to work for AFSCME. Tell me about that. Was that a different experience than the previous one?

CHAVEZ-THOMPSON: Totally, totally different experience working for AFSCME. They put me on layaway for three months. People say, what does that mean? When I left the laborers, the area director for AFSCME needed an international rep, an organizer. But he didn't have a job. He wanted me to work for him, but he said, "It'll take me a little while to create a position." And so in June of 1971, I went to work for him as a secretary but I was doing the work of an organizer. I was recruiting in Austin, Texas. I had moved into Austin from Lubbock, and so he said, "Give me a little time."

So by September, he had created the international rep position and I went to work for the international union. It was, like, the most fantastic wage in the world. I was totally flabbergasted that I could earn so much money. I had earned \$150 a week as the coordinator for the tornado relief, but then I started getting big bucks. I mean, I think I was at \$10,000 a year, and I bought a new car and I just thought that I was just living the Life of Riley because I loved the job. I loved organizing public employees. A lot tougher, very tough, because the laws in Texas do not lend themselves to the representation of public employees, but I became an international rep in 1971 and I stayed in that position for 2 ½ years. I had to give it up 2 ½ years later because of my daughter.

All the time that I was working those five years, between the age of 2 and 7, my mother took care of my daughter, because when I moved to Austin, my parents followed me. They moved to Austin in September of 1971, and my dad needed work. There was no construction work in Lubbock at the time so he came to Austin and got work in Austin and my mother fell in love with Austin. That ended up being her home for all of her life after they moved there.

So I started doing work in the public employee field and it was just great, it was my field. I felt so comfortable, my niche, my calling, whatever you wanted to call it. That was it. Public employment. And battling the public officials who have no respect for their workers, battling to upgrade the wages, doing the same thing except we couldn't call it negotiations. We had to call it consultation. We had to call it labor management meetings where we would try to upgrade the employees' salaries and try to upgrade the benefits of public employees.

BANKS NUTTER: Is that because they were public employees?

CHAVEZ-THOMPSON: Public servants, and the law in Texas says specifically that you cannot recognize a union for public employees as their bargaining agent. They can't strike, they can't go on work stoppages. So, all we can do under the law is that they are allowed to be represented by a union. So that's

where we qualified. And so, I went into it to organize public employees, and I did. I organized the local in San Antonio. I helped organize some of the members in the school district in Houston and the garbage collection and the city departments in Dallas and Austin, Texas, et cetera.

But after I moved from Austin to San Antonio in 1972, my mother could no longer take care of my daughter because they didn't want to move to San Antonio, so I put her in daycare. My daughter went to before-school and after-school daycare. And she, of course, had been raised by my mother for five years and it was very difficult for her to be away from my mom, because I would be working in Houston and I'd call home and I'd have a little 7-year-old just crying her eyes out. "Come home, come home, I want you home." And so, I came back to San Antonio, took the assistant business manager position in the San Antonio local that I had organized, and got a drastic cut in pay, but I was home. I was home to take her to school and I was home to pick her up from the daycare and she knew I was there.

So I gave up my international rep position to go to a local union job, but it was even a bigger reward, because I didn't just organize the people, I represented them. I was actually able to get people pay increases if they were under classified. I was able to represent people who were fired, and I got them their jobs back, or who were suspended and I managed to get the suspension turned into a reprimand or a counseling. It was hands on. I actually didn't just organize. I also was able to help people who were in trouble and did not know how to speak for themselves.

BANKS NUTTER: What did the typical day look like for you?

CHAVEZ-THOMPSON: Well, I was actually there by 8 in the morning until 8 at night, sometimes. Public employees don't have really regular hours. The typical day was writing up grievances. I would sit, take notes from a union member who had been fired or suspended. I would check with that individual to see if I could get the full story. Now mind you, they tell me their side of the story. Sometimes they leave out big holes as to why they were absent and the pattern might be that they were absent on Wednesdays for six months.

One particular union member got himself into trouble, he was going to get a six-day suspension and then was going to get fired, and he comes in demanding representation, he said, "that's why I pay my union dues for," da-da-da-da. And I said, "OK, let me get some information from you." And so, I started asking him questions, "Well, why did you sign this paper? It says that you accepted the counseling and this one says you accepted the reprimand. And now, the next step would be the suspension and you're fighting the suspension." The union member continued to rant and rave, saying, "Oh, they're taking the food out of

the mouths of my children and they're this or that" — and oh, he was just very indignant. And so, what happened was, the final result was that he was absent on Wednesdays because that was his girlfriend's day off, and one day he got sick on a Wednesday and his wife called looking for him, and he got caught. So I told him that I'd gotten the suspension reduced from six days to two days. I said, "Look," I said, "Serve the two days. We'll ask them not to fire you, and you've got to come to work and you got to do your job so that I can do my job in representing you."

But the typical day was just writing grievances, meetings with supervisors, first level, second level. Sometimes preparing a case, a big case of termination that we would have to take to the Civil Service Commission, and it would be me against the city attorney, an assistant city attorney. And I would often win against the city attorney, because I knew the rules. I knew the law, I knew the personnel policies and I could run circles around the attorneys, especially if I'm taking the violin out and talking about what a great worker this person is and, you know, that kind of stuff. So it was a typical day.

In the evenings, sometimes after 7, I would go to a Central Labor Council meeting, or a union meeting, or union members that don't get out till 5 and come down to the office. If I left before 7, I felt guilty, because I thought, "Oh, my God, there's still so much work on my desk. I have to get it done. I kind of slacked off after about the twentieth year though. I said, "You know, it'll be waiting for me tomorrow morning when I get in."

BANKS NUTTER: It doesn't go away. It's still there.

CHAVEZ-THOMPSON: And the gremlins don't do it for you.

BANKS NUTTER: Now, throughout this time you were married and had two children?

CHAVEZ-THOMPSON: I had one daughter up until 1976, when my son was born. There's eleven years difference between the two children.

BANKS NUTTER: But still, even as a parent of one, when you were married, was your husband supportive of the level of commitment with this kind of job?

CHAVEZ-THOMPSON: I don't think he liked it, but I pretty much was a very independent person and it just so happened that my independence allowed me to do the work. He didn't like it because it kept me from home and when my son was born in 1976, I made an even greater effort to come home earlier, but it was 6 o'clock before I would get home and he would go and pick up the baby from the babysitter's and be the caregiver for a period of time. Or, if I had union meetings, sometimes I would send my staff to some and I would try to get home, because I had a baby. But after twenty years, we knew that we didn't have a marriage anymore

and we got a divorce. I tell people that the next twenty years, because we've been divorced now almost twenty years, he and I became closer. We became friends. We're parents of two children that we love very much.

But it did cost me. The job did cost me that marriage. I wasn't willing to invest much more in that marriage because my job was probably the one thing that was very important to me, and by that time, my husband didn't share the same enthusiasm for my work. And so, it was an amicable divorce. I tell people it cost me \$65. Because the lawyer said, "The minute it stops being a friendly divorce, I'm sending you to somebody else and you're going to have pay." I said, "No, it is a friendly divorce." The lawyer said, "Yeah, right." And so, he says, "I'll tell you what. I'll do it for free. You pay the court cost, but the minute it starts turning bad, I'll go." I said, "OK." So, it cost me a \$65 filing fee.

BANKS NUTTER: Throughout this time — the late 60s, early 70s, the women's movement was entering the scene. Can you remember back to when you started hearing about it? I mean, did it enter into your daily life at all in a way in that period?

CHAVEZ-THOMPSON: Not really. I was pretty much insulated from it. The everyday going to work as a secretary, worrying about making payments and stretching that last penny and what have you. I think there was one woman who really raised my expectations of what I could be, and her name was Rosa Walker. She was the VIP director, the Volunteers In Politics Director, for the state federation of the AFL-CIO, and that was about the highest-ranking woman that I knew in the labor movement. Of course, she never became the secretary-treasurer, she never got beyond that job, but she was very good at it. So during those years there weren't that many women role models. It was mostly men. Even in my days in San Antonio. We put together the Public Employee Council of San Antonio and Bexar County, and it was seven unions, three delegates apiece, and it was twenty men and me. It was one of those situations where you had to make do in a man's world.

And I never went out deliberately to become a feminist, an activist in the feminist movement, but I thought there was some merit in it. I felt there was some merit in why women should be more important, whether it was in the labor movement or politics or anyplace else. But it was a situation where I didn't think that I could make a lot of difference, not knowing that I was making a difference by being the only Latino woman in San Antonio who was the head of a union. And, after a while it kind of dawned on me. It hit me.

BANKS NUTTER: Now, even AFSCME, I would imagine there among the rank and file, there would have been more women even then than in the laborers' union.

CHAVEZ-THOMPSON: Yes. When I talk about locally, it was Texas, but when I started getting active within AFSCME, I saw women who were executive directors. I saw women who were presidents outside of Texas and when the opportunity came for me in 1977, I became the executive director of the local, and I was the first Latina to hold the position of Executive Director of any local union in any part of the state, and when I became an International Vice President of AFSCME in 1988, I was the first Latina, or Latino, to hold that position in the history of the International. So I began to break some of those glass ceilings and I began to break through in some areas where Latinos had never been and Latino women, much less. Now those opportunities are out there. But back in the 50s and the 60s, even the 70s, those opportunities were very few and far between.

BANKS NUTTER: We'll talk more about that tomorrow. But today, I want to finish up. I've spoken with other women who, both organizers and then union officers, and I'd like to ask you: What is it in your mind you think that makes a good organizer, an effective organizer?

CHAVEZ-THOMPSON: You've got to believe in what you're talking about. It can't just be a spiel. You can't just say, "Oh, you need dignity, you need respect on the job. Justice, equality." Those are very important things and you have to sign this card so that you can get all these great benefits by being a member of the union. You have to believe that it can be a social change. You have to believe that this is something that can change a person's life. That joining a union cannot just better themselves by good wages and good benefits but that it can help in changing the environment of where that person works, that it can change their working conditions, that it can improve their safety on the job, that they have a voice to speak to the indignities that sometimes occur to them or to others.

So being a good organizer, naturally, you have to have a glib tongue. You have to be on top of the situation and you have to be completely devoted to it. I remember going to the 11 to 7 shift at night and I was there, as people were coming in at 11 p.m. and I was there as people were coming out at 7 a.m. Or, the 3 to 11 shift. I'd meet up with the ones coming off the 3 to 11 shift. If I was organizing in the garbage collection department, they go to work at 7 a.m. They start straggling in about 6:30. I would be there organizing there at 6:30.

When we organized the librarians, that were not organized in the City of San Antonio — they work six days a week, and they have Sundays off and one other day off during the week. So, Sunday, they were all off. And Sundays were the only time that I could meet with them in a meeting to organize them. So I'd go to church, and after church, I'd go to the union hall to have a meeting, because that's the only day they could meet.

You have to be willing to put in 10-, 12-, 14-hour days, because that's what an organizer is supposed to do, and you have to take what comes with it. The insults, the bottles thrown at you — I had bottles thrown at me. They hit the ground and broke and cut my feet. On many occasions, not exactly spitting at me but spitting at the floor close to me and I got the message. They were saying they were spitting on whatever you're here to do. And oftentimes, it'd get so discouraging. But the life of an organizer is to go out there and recruit and make believers of the people that are actually needing the help, and, more importantly, trying to teach them how to speak for themselves. That's also key in the job of any organizer.

BANKS NUTTER: Now, you were a union officer, too. Are there different qualities for that?

CHAVEZ-THOMPSON: It's harder. It's much harder. I think when I became the executive director in 1977, I didn't think about it right away and it didn't dawn on me until much later, I was management. I wasn't used to being management. I was used to being the one who fights for the underdog, et cetera, and then I ended up being management, and I couldn't handle it for a little while because I had to talk to the employee who wasn't doing their job. I had to counsel that employee. I had to direct the operation of the local union and being management was a little difficult to take. But I learned it. It's just one more skill that I had to learn, how to get the work out of the employees that worked for me. And of course, the first six months that I had the job, I kept thinking, I can't do this. I can't do this. This is beyond whatever I thought I would be, and yes, I thought I would be the executive director but now that I am, can I be? You know, am I doing a good job? And then at the end of the six months, I realized, wait a minute, you're not doing anything different than you did before. The only difference is you don't have to take it to somebody to approve it. You have to have confidence in yourself that what you're doing and how you're getting it done is the right way.

And the other thing is, I had a lot of good friends that helped me. My future second husband was president of the Amalgamated Transit Union, and another friend of mine was the president of the Postal Workers Union. Whenever I ran into a big bump, that I needed some help, the two of them would help. I had another friend who was the director of the old Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union in town and she was also one of my mentors and I would call her up and present her with different kinds of a situation. What do I do? How would you handle it? Or have you had something like this happen to you?

So there were other people in my life who helped me through some of the toughest spots and some very, very awful things that happened in my career were — it got to the point where I wanted to quit. I wanted to quit because of the kind of rumors and the scandals and the reputation

that I thought people had of me. I came close to quitting two or three times, and these people, these friends, wouldn't let me quit. They would encourage me. They would help me. They would support me. They would commiserate with me, and it got me through some of the toughest times that I had in the late 1970s in my career, early 80s, because I wouldn't be here today if I had quit.

BANKS NUTTER: Now these rumors against you — was that kind of an antiunion piece?

CHAVEZ-THOMPSON: No. The executive director before me didn't like the job he'd gone into and decided to start a campaign against me to get me fired, so he could come back. And my executive board, when I told them what was happening, I said I'd be more than glad to step aside, and they said, "If you do, we all drop out of the union. We don't want him back." Which shocked me because I thought that he had a lot more support. And I said, "Well, I just thought you might want him back instead of me." They said, "Oh, no. We love you. You treat us with respect and we want you." So, I decided, OK, let's stick it out.

And then there began to be a letter-writing campaign that went out to all the board of trustees of the housing authority, the utility company that we represented, the City of San Antonio, the county — we had about twelve agencies, and these anonymous letters would go out at least once, sometimes twice a week. Some of the nicknames that they used in these letters were "liver lips" — that was one of my nicknames that they used, "liver lips." "Political Clout Raminez" — that was my married name at the time. And the letter talked about how many politicians I was sleeping with. The letters questioned the paternity of my son — whose son was he? — that he wasn't my husband's.

And it became a very, very difficult period because there were people who would call my house and speak to my daughter, and back in '79, she was already about 14 or 15 years old. And I would come home and she'd say, "They called again, mom." And I said, "Baby, don't pay attention to what they say." "I know, mom, but it hurts that they're talking about you."

One day, the mayor's assistant, Shirl Thomas, called me and said, "Mayor Cockrell wants you to know that she's getting all these letters," and I was just totally mortified. I knew they were being sent to her. She said, "The mayor says that she knows you've got a hard job to do. Just keep at it." I said, "Wow." And then the chairman of the water utility, who was an eye doctor and was a good friend of mine for many years, got appointed to that position, he called me and he said, "Linda, this is Jose San Martin." I said, "Hi, Dr. San Martin. How are you?" He said, "I'm getting all these letters but don't worry, Darling, they're going in file 13." I said, "Oh, thank you."

So then, in that month's local union newsletter, the headline was "Keep the Letters Coming." I wrote, "I've been getting all these letters

accusing me of all sorts of things. All it's doing is getting me more support from the people who are getting them, so keep the letters coming." The letters stopped. But during that whole year, they were filled with such horrible, horrible things. Scandalous things. Rumors. Trying to ruin my reputation. Trying to get me to back off and I didn't back off. I literally went down to a size 7 dress and I was normally then a 10-11 size. Because I couldn't eat, I had a nervous stomach. I was really, really upset. But it was people standing by me. My first husband who stood with me. My friends who stood with me. But it was a very, very difficult year for me.

And, like I said, twice I came close to quitting. I said, "Why? Why am I doing this? Why am I doing this to myself, to my family?" And it was tough. It wasn't easy. I stuck it out and I'm glad I did.

END DISC 2

DISC 3

BANKS NUTTER: It's February 10, 2004, and we're back at AFL-CIO headquarters. We talked about a lot yesterday and I sort of wanted to pick up where we left off. You became an international vice president in AFSCME in 1988?

CHAVEZ-THOMPSON: Yes.

BANKS NUTTER: Why did you decide to pursue higher office within the union?

CHAVEZ-THOMPSON: One of the things that I saw before I decided to run was what an international vice president can do. I mean, what kind of influence does that kind of a person have? And I was on the fringes of the international union scene, in other words, the national level of leadership, because I saw what our international vice president was doing. But I also saw what he wasn't doing. In other words, I thought he should do more. But you didn't question. I mean, there was a stigma on you if you raised a flag of controversy. And so, I would very gently, softly, wonder why we couldn't we ask for this or why we couldn't ask for that. And I was told that that was the job of the international vice president. And so, I said, "OK."

So in 1984, I started making noises that I was interested in running for international vice president. So the international vice president found out and had a chat with me and said that he wanted to run one more term and at the end of his term, he would endorse me — which meant that all I had to do was wait for four years until 1988 and run for office and he'd endorse me and I would have a good base of support.

So I patiently waited those four years and as 1988 came around, and as I was waiting for him to support me, he said that he couldn't, because the guy who was going to follow him in his position in his local union was running and of course, he couldn't endorse me because it would betray his confidence in his guy. So, I said, "So you're going endorse him?" and he says, "Well, technically, no." He lied again. [laugh]

Behind the scenes, I knew that he was trying to help him get endorsements, but what he didn't know was that in those four years, I had traveled every state and there were seven states in the southwestern district, and I traveled to Oklahoma, to New Mexico, Colorado, Arizona, Nevada, and uh, let me see, I'm trying to think of the other state, but there were seven states. Texas, of course, was one of the states. And I had told them, "I intend to run in four years, I'll have the international vice president's support and I want your support." So I managed to get all the endorsements from all the other states, except Texas, and I had three locals, the major locals in Texas already sewn up because they thought I was a good alternative for, or a good follow-up for, the other guy. So by the time that he told me he wasn't supporting

me, and by the time my opponent went to these states, they had already endorsed me, so I won.

And it's kind of like running after a car and you catch it. If you're the puppy dog, what are you going to do with it? [laugh] And I was in one of those situations. I had to learn that there's a lot of things that a vice president can do. There's a lot of things that a vice president can influence, but there are some things that you had to be a lot more careful about because a lot of it is politics.

I learned how to maneuver in the world of national politics and I loved it. I mean, it was almost like this was a new field, a higher-level game, that you learn, and the experience was absolutely phenomenal. I ended up on the international executive board and sat quietly and listened and observed and learned as I went to meetings. And, because I was the new kid on the block, didn't know a lot of people, I knew some but not too many, except I knew one very important person, and he was a vice president of the union from New York and had a local union of 250,000 people. And he and I were buddies. We'd gone on a trip to Singapore together so we ended up knowing each other in 1981 and here I am in 1988 coming into the international executive board without too many friends, and representing a district that had very low membership. In New York State, there are six international vice presidents. In the Southwest, where I was vice president, it takes seven states to put one vice president together, OK?

BANKS NUTTER: That's based on membership?

CHAVEZ-THOMPSON: Yes, it's based on membership. And so, I was just one little old vice president from the Southwest with not too many members, just enough to get me elected vice president, and here I'm a close buddy of this guy from New York who took me under his wing, and every time we went out to dinner or they went out to dinner they invited me, and every time we hung out together, he invited me along with the other international vice presidents, so I ended up being good friends with a lot of his friends and unbeknownst to me, I became influential, because I had close ties with them and they controlled such a big large block of votes. I did it because of the friendship that I had with him, not the power, but it helped me.

It brought me more knowledge, because I was able to sit in on meetings, I was able to learn as well. You know, there are so many people who have been mentors in one way or another to me that I have just gleaned information and learned by observing and learned by the things that they do, and I might have an absolutely fantastic idea and I would sound it out with this guy, and he would say, "Yes, but you gotta think about this, and have you thought that?" And I hadn't, to me it was just a great idea. I thought it was terrific, and let's go get it, right? Let's go do it. But it helped me — I'm on the national scene. I'm still thinking

local. I'm still thinking like I'm still back home dealing with the local politicians, the local issues, and by sitting around and talking with much more experienced people than myself, I learned that there's broader specter of an idea. How does it affect not just what you'd like to accomplish out of it, but for others?

So I learned and I served eight years on the AFSCME executive board. I was reelected to opposition on my second go-around and of course, before the end of my term in 1995, I was elected to this position and my term ran out in '96. So I served eight years with my international union as a vice president.

BANKS NUTTER: Now, what were some of the concerns that brought you to want that position?

CHAVEZ-THOMPSON: The specific problems were that nobody paid attention to us in the Southwest. Most of the states back there in the AFSCME Southwest District are right-to-work states. Most of them don't have collective bargaining for state employees — most of them, with the exception now of New Mexico, which got a collective bargaining law recently. Texas, Oklahoma, most of those states just almost are backwater states because of the kind of laws, the restrictions in laws, against public employees. Same thing in Arizona. Same thing in Colorado, Nevada, and Utah. We have what we call consultation rights and grievance procedures and the right to be represented by a union, but we didn't have any money. We were very small.

So one of the things was, for me as an international vice president, to make sure that the interests of each of those states were met at the international headquarters. If there was a proposal made from Arizona for an organizing drive, I made sure that I knew everything about it and could influence and could meet with the international staff to plead the case as well as for the other folks in Arizona.

The chance to influence politics. Sometimes all we have at our disposal is who's elected to office, because I tell people, in states like Texas and other places where you don't have the right to collectively bargain, you collectively beg. I mean, that's the bottom line. You just go, hat in hand, and say, "Could you please give us a better life insurance program? Could you please give us more money for our health care plan?" Or, "Could you please give us a raise?" The only way to have any kind of influence was politics. So we slowly began to influence the international to send dollars for politics and for organizing.

In the race for governor in the state of Texas in 1990, Ann Richards ran. I was a close friend of hers while she served in office as the state treasurer, and so I convinced the international union that Ann Richards [then state treasurer] was the one we should go with. And they put political money in there to help her win her race and she did. The same

thing with some of the folks in some of other states. They banked on certain politicians that could help them.

In the state house in New Mexico, there were certain people that the union in New Mexico, the AFSCME union in New Mexico, felt that if they were able to get them elected, that they could pass a collective bargaining law. And they were able to, except there was only one problem: they put a sunset clause in it. And when that sunset clause ran out, it stopped, and the governor was a Republican by then so he didn't — he didn't allow the continuance of collective bargaining in New Mexico. They've got a new bill — I mean, they passed a new bill and the governor signed it now, but, so, it was money for politics, money for organizing.

I asked for and got educational conferences into my district that would come close to the states where I represented people because it was harder for us to get a round-trip ticket anywhere. If the conference was in California or the conference was up in the Midwest or in the Northeast, and so we tried to get them to come a little closer, maybe have a conference in New Orleans, to where we could drive there and be able to take several people, even if we had to pile them up in hotel rooms, two to a bed, at least we were close enough to where we could afford to drive. And we had a big conference in New Orleans one time and I was able to take six people from my local union. Never been done before.

One time, we had a women's conference and they had it in Chicago and we did fundraisers, we pooled our money together and I took four women for the first time to a women's conference in Chicago. We were so excited because we were actually able to do some of for the Southwest district. By the way, I remembered the states of Texas, Oklahoma, New Mexico, Colorado, Arizona, Nevada, and Utah. And those states have very small AFSCME memberships. So it was very hard but it was a very good, learned lesson on how you operate at the national level.

BANKS NUTTER: I'm sure you would have at this point become a mentor of others. What did you learn about the national politics scene?

CHAVEZ-THOMPSON: It's hard to get into if you're a woman. I hate to say it this way, but the only way that I was able break through was because I had a friend who was a man who was my mentor and to some extent opened the door. Women still don't have the place at the table that they should, whether it's at international unions or otherwise. We have few women presidents of their unions, and so I guess the only thing that I tell women when they ask me, "How did you do it? How did you get through, how did you break that glass ceiling?" et cetera, you have to develop a very thick skin. If you wear your feelings on your shirt sleeve, you're going get smashed because you have to make your way in the world of union

politics that is mostly made up of men. And you have to weather that some that look down on you, some that think you're there because you're the secretary instead of a leader within your local union or your international union or what have you.

And, if I were to mentor someone, I'd say, "OK, number one, don't feel like you have to have everybody like you," because that's the first thing that's wrong, and that's what I used to do. I wanted everybody to like me. I wanted to be nice, and I wanted everybody to say, "Oh, what a wonderful person she is." And so I didn't want to hurt anybody's feelings and certainly, I didn't want anybody to hurt my feelings, and I was getting nowhere. I wasn't getting the respect that I thought I deserved. I wasn't getting my ideas listened to. I wasn't getting my suggestions to somebody who would say, "That's great. We haven't thought about that, Linda. We're so glad that you thought of that." I wasn't getting that because I was too busy trying to get people to like me.

And I decided at some point in my life, OK, I'd love to have everybody like me, but if that's going keep me from doing my job, let 'em hate me. And I took an attitude. And for many years, I wasn't liked for a while [laugh] and it didn't bother me because I knew that I was doing the job that my members wanted me to do for them. But I was outspoken. I was upfront. I was part of controversy if that's what it had to take to get my membership listened to, and I had to develop that thick skin. I had to develop the thick skin that if I went home and I cried a few tears because I'd been insulted or somebody said something bad about me and I was hurt, I could do that at home. The next morning, I would just get right back up again and go and that was not in any lesson plan that I learned. I had to learn that on my own, that a lot of people might not like me. A lot of people might even want to bring me down, but that also fine-tuned my skills on survival. And how do you survive?

It can be a very brutal world if you're a woman, and especially a Latino woman, because they just don't think you have any place where they are, any place in the hierarchy of the labor movement, at least in my experience, and I had to show that I did have a rightful place there, and some women say, "How do you do it?" It's inside of every woman and it's just how strong you can be or how strong you want to be.

BANKS NUTTER: I was going ask you if you felt at any time if race was a factor on top of being a woman.

CHAVEZ-THOMPSON: Oh, yes. Oh, many times, many times. One time I became so disheartened, I guess, of so many rumors and innuendoes and — I mean, that's politics, you know. You pick the wrong candidate and somebody picks somebody else, somebody's going to start a rumor about you, you know. I knew that would happen. But there was a period of time in my

life when things were very sensitive for me about who I was, what I was doing, what I was about.

And I just decided to do my own little survey within my own membership, because that's how hard they had hit me with some issues, very personal issues. And so I did a survey with some of my male union members and I asked them, several of them, and I said, "What do you think of me?" They said, "What do you mean?" I said, "What do you think — when you come here, you don't see anybody but me?" I had two male staff and two female staff and myself. I said, "You'll wait half an hour to see me. Why do you want to see me?" I said, "Is it because I do a good job? Do you think of me as a woman? Do you think of me as your union representative? Why do you want to see me?" They said, "You're good. You do the job. You don't back down. You tell the supervisor where to go and what to do and I know that even if you lose, that you're defending me and that you're going to do the best that you can."

So I asked that over a period of a few weeks, I guess just to get my own self-respect back, because I wanted to feel that my union members did not think of me as a woman, that they thought of me as a capable, standup union representative who just happened to be a woman. And I got the feedback that I needed. I needed it. I can't tell you now how important it was for me then because my self-confidence was shattered, my self-esteem was shattered and when someone is questioning the paternity of my son at a time when I'm vulnerable, it just tells me, is this the place I want to be? Is this what I'm destined for, to go through something like this for the union? Is this something that is going to bring me happiness when I'm so unhappy right now over these rumors and the rumor-mongers who want to destroy me?

And so, at that very vulnerable time in my life, I wanted to find out, why do you come to me, or why do you want me to represent you? What is it about me that gives you the confidence? And I got out of it. I mean I did my own self-analysis and self-psychiatric whatever you want to call it, because I said, these people think I'm good, so I must be good. So to hell with everybody else. I don't know if I'm supposed to say that on video or not. [laugh]

BANKS NUTTER: You can say whatever you want.

CHAVEZ-THOMPSON: But so, it took a while because something like that can really, really destroy your inner self because so many people were suffering because of the attacks on me. My husband, my first husband then was, rightfully so, asking questions, "What's going on? What's this all about?" My daughter was getting phone calls at my home. It was a published number. I wasn't hiding. My son was born, he was tiny, he didn't know what was going on. But it was a period of my life that I needed the support of friends and family and my own union members to tell me that

I was doing the right thing, I was in the right job, I was doing the right thing, and so that I could get back into the swing of things, I don't care who likes me and I don't care who hates me, and I'm going to do the best job I can. And that was very difficult for me. It was a year that I would never want to repeat again, nor would I wish it on anybody else, not even my worst enemy.

BANKS NUTTER: What a test of fire. So, you are a woman and a parent. I read a speech that you gave, actually last fall, at the Oregon AFL-CIO convention and you told a story about how your daughter really didn't like growing up with a mother in the union because you weren't the "normal" mom.

CHAVEZ-THOMPSON: [laugh] You found that one.

BANKS NUTTER: Oh, yes, the Internet is amazing. As a working mom, although as that old button said, "all mothers are working mothers," but still, that is an issue for many parents. You talked a little bit about this off camera. There's still an expectation that mothers have a particular responsibility that sometimes can't be met because of those jobs. I wonder if you could talk a little bit about what some of the complications were of that and how you worked it out or didn't and how it felt at the time?

CHAVEZ-THOMPSON: I often talk about that, especially when we're trying to let it sink in to people, especially — I sometimes add it on to my speeches because I want to connect with people. I want them to know that some of the sacrifices that they make, no one will probably ever know every sacrifice that is made by a union representative, a union leader in their personal lives, and even in their professional lives, the sacrifices and what they give up, sometimes, to do good for others. And I tell them in my speeches that we'll never get monuments and statues or buildings named after us, but that they should feel good about the things that they do for people, so that people can enjoy a better life.

At the age of 15, my daughter finally decided that going to the union office was not a party when you had to stuff envelopes and lick them for mailings and what have you, and she decided that she wasn't going with me anymore. And up until then, it was OK. I took my little boy, who was about 3 or 4, and he had the run of the place and my daughter would go with me and then she stopped going, because I wasn't around to go to many of her school activities. I always had her go with the next-door neighbor whose little girl was the same age and they were in the same class. There were often times when I didn't take her to any of her school activities on a Saturday because I had meetings or whatnot. And so she decided that she didn't like the union anymore. And it didn't make me feel good. It was a very tough time for her but she was a teenager and she was at that age and I sort of blamed it on, she's a teenager. But for a long time, she didn't like the union because it took

me away from her. It made me not normal because I had these long hours, two or three meetings a week in the evening, librarians who only meet on Sundays and I'd go to church and then after church, I'd go to the hall and meet up with the librarians for a union meeting.

So for a long time that happened, and she finished high school and she got a part-time job and went to community college for a couple of years and then she said, "Mom, college isn't for me. I want to get a full-time job." Well, she went into a full-time job. She went in as a part-time library aide. Full-time, she went in as a recreation leader at Parks & Recreation. She signed a union card before she even showed up to the job, because we represented, of course, the recreation people. And we had that Parks & Recreation Department pretty well organized, so there weren't that many problems. We had a few, but not many problems.

It was when she transferred over to the airport that she realized what a union was. She was about 21, 22 then, and one day she comes home and she said, "Mom, you know what? You know what? Those people at the airport don't know what their rights are." She said, "You know, the supervisor yells at them in front of everybody else and these people don't know they're not supposed to put up with that and I told them that my mom could come down here and talk to them." And I almost said, what have you done with my daughter? And I said, "Well, how did you know what to tell them?" "Mom, I hear you on the phone all the time." And she said, "But I told them that my mom could come down here," meaning that I could fix their problems and I went into the bathroom and just cried. Full circle.

The 15-year-old who rejected the union and didn't want anything to do with this nasty old thing that her mother seemed devoted to and all of a sudden is advocating that there are people who don't know what their rights are, and she organized them. People came to her, knew who I was, we brought them cards and we got job studies, we upgraded their salaries, we represented them on grievances and she blossomed, became a union steward.

And many years later — I love to tell this part of it because no matter what my failings were as a mother then, I did try to do the best that I could, she's turned out to be just a wonderful mother — but years later, when I was going to run for this position, I called her. I didn't call my mother, because I knew my mother would say, "No, you're not going anywhere." But I called my daughter and I said, "Baby," I said, "I've been asked to run for this position and if I were to win, I'd have to move to Washington. It isn't a job that I can take and stay in Texas."

So we're both on the phone, we're crying, and I said, "But you know, I might not win. They have to create the position first, and I might not win, and what are they going to do? I'm going to be made to suffer and watch my grandson grow up?" She said, "Mom, you always win." And I said, "Well, it's a possibility that I might not. They might create the position and they might not." She says, "No, Mom. You always win."

And Mom, can you imagine all the good things you can do for people like the things you've done here?" I cried some more. We were on the phone while I was doing this. And then I accepted to run for the position. And I called her for her birthday this year and I sang Happy Birthday to her and I said, "I cannot believe I am singing Happy Birthday to my 38-year-old daughter." She says, "Mother." And I said, "I just can't believe it." I said, "Wonderful mom to my grandkids and a wonderful daughter." There were a lot of things that I didn't do for her but she grew up to be a wonderful woman and a wonderful mother and a wonderful person. She's like a best friend to me, and very supportive.

BANKS NUTTER: You say there were a lot of things you didn't do? Have you resolved that? I'm not saying you did or didn't. But do you think some of it was society saying you should have been there?

CHAVEZ-THOMPSON: Society said I had to be there. Society said I had to be a full-time mom and a full-time worker. I mean, that's what society tells a woman. That she's got to provide the childcare, she's got to provide the sick care for a child, she's got to provide food, if she works, contribute to the household expenses and be superwoman. That is what society wants from women. If you lack at any part of that, you get criticized. You're not exactly a good mother, or you're either not a good mother or not a good worker or not a good wife, or something. There's going to be some criticism and why it lands more on women's shoulders is because society says we're the ones that are supposed to nurture and raise our children; the men are the providers. As long as the man brings home a check and helps pay the bills, that's all that is expected of a man.

My son learned to wash his own clothes. My son learned how to clean his own room and his own bathroom and if he didn't, there was hell to pay, because Mom would be very upset if he didn't. My son learned those things because I didn't want him to be inept like so many of our children, including some girls who don't do anything or boys who don't learn how to do anything or take care of themselves. So, society says those are the things we're supposed to do. When we don't do them, they point fingers at us because we don't. I provided food for my child. I bought her clothes. I didn't go to some of her events. She got a lot of hugs, she got a lot of kisses, she got a lot of love from me.

And I know that it's a stupid saying, it's not how much time but the quality of the time. When we were together, we had fun. When we were together, we enjoyed ourselves. Those seven years from the age of 15 to 22 didn't mean that my daughter stopped talking to me or that we didn't share with each other or we weren't loving with each other. It was just that she didn't take part in the life that I was leading, which was in the union business. I would take her to conventions and she'd have fun. She went to Las Vegas for a convention and she had fun, and those kinds of things. But I loved her and she loved me. She might not have liked what

I did because it took me away from her, but it didn't mean that she hated her mother.

And I sometimes speak of that and one time, the feeling really got to me and teared up a little bit and when I finished, there was this big burly machinist who comes up and he gives me a bear hug and he says, "You were talking to me." And he says, "It's not been many people that have made me cry. You made me cry because I remember, and I'm going through some of that now with some of my children. But you made it come together. You said something that triggered why I'm doing this." And I tell people that I hope someday they'll have a special moment, like when my daughter decided that airport workers didn't know their rights and she was going to do something about it. I said, "Maybe your loved one will realize why you do this and the dedication isn't just because you're doing something for them but you're doing something for many others who can't speak up for themselves." And it resonates with people, connects with people, that we give up something to do a better good for others.

BANKS NUTTER: Do you think that it's any easier for your daughter now? Do you think there's less pressure from society to be Superwoman now than there was maybe twenty years ago?

CHAVEZ-THOMPSON: Oh, definitely, yes. My daughter doesn't have to go through hoops to try to prove she's worthy of being a mother and worthy of being a woman and I sometimes tell her she kind of goes a little overboard with the children and I think it's to make up for what she didn't have. In other words, she didn't have a lot of other extracurricular activities beyond the school stuff, and so my granddaughter has dancing classes, my grandson has bowling classes, or a bowling league, and so she jumps from here to there and juggles kids from here to there and I tell her, "Stop, you know, some of it, stop some of it." And she says, "But they love to go, mother." And I said, "Well, OK."

BANKS NUTTER: Yes, that's a hard one. Kids are so busy. Shifting a little to focus on the AFL-CIO: historically, the AFL-CIO has been criticized for its lack of initiative in organizing women and people of color but since 1995 under the "New Direction," you and John Sweeney have put so much heart into it. My understanding of that was the New Direction was to address those historical criticisms. Going back to 1995, what was your goal when your position at the AFL-CIO had just been just created and you were part of that platform? What were the initial goals that brought you on board?

CHAVEZ-THOMPSON: What I was told when the call was made for me to run for a newly created position was that they wanted the face of labor to look like the people that are represented by labor, and my knowledge of what

happened prior to my selection was that they were looking either for a person of color or a woman. And voila! I qualified on both counts. So they said, "Will you run?" And I ran. I said, "But what is this position? What is this position supposed to do? What are we going to do?" There wasn't a really clear idea at the very beginning, other than put a face at the top of the AFL-CIO that looked like the women and the people of color that had for so long been missing at the top.

As the idea kept developing and prior to the convention, a description was put out that this position would work and coordinate activities of state central labor councils, state federations, work with constituency groups, build coalitions and partnerships among community groups. And I liked it. I thought, that is just my cup of tea. That is something that I believed in for the longest time.

The organizing part of it was because John Sweeney came from a union where more and more, every day, the people they were organizing were people of color and women, and the rest of the union movement was coming around to realizing that the pool of workers out there were a different color than what had been there in the labor movement before and a different gender than the people that had come into the unions for many years before. So there wasn't enough being done. There wasn't enough emphasis, there wasn't enough money. There was not enough effort being made by unions. There were some unions who had no organizing departments. There was some unions, including AFSCME, that you had to have negotiating skills versus organizing skills. So they hired more staff reps to represent people in grievances than they did organizing reps. So this had contributed to a loss of membership over the years.

So in 1995, the theme was a "New American Labor Movement." We have to change as time has changed the work force, as time has changed and we have to bring those people into the movement, and we have to change the attitudes in our national unions to start putting money aside to organize. Because, if we keep going the way we are, we're just going to keep losing and losing and losing. If we don't gain new members, then we're going to be extinct in a matter of years. Some unions already were spending money on organizing and some were not. So what we did in 1995 was decide that we had to go out there and find the membership in the new people that have come into the workforce and that was women and people of color.

So many of our unions started setting aside budget dollars to hire organizers, competition was strong to hire new organization, and a new attitude, taking a look at issues like immigration, because a lot of these people that are here and the new workers that are here, especially entry-level jobs, especially with some unions, those are the ones they're trying to organize, those people are here, undocumented, and so the issue of immigration, the issue of social change in the community, even environmental issues where labor was always on the opposite of

environmentalists in this country, we have to take a look at that because that's another whole group of people that believes in something and maybe we could agree on a candidate that believed in some of their issues and believed in our issues. Where we could coalesce?

So the job of the executive vice president was, how do we connect with that community that we've lost touch with? During the Vietnam War, labor was with the hawks, education was with the doves, and then we never got back together again. We had a teach-in in Columbia University that was attended by 2,000 people. The very first teach-in that the three officers had, and the faculty and the students were like, Wow, labor is coming back and talking to us.

We do a program called Union Summer, where we take young people between the ages of 18 and 30 and send them into cities all across America and not to do clerical, filing, we send them in as organizers. We send them in to do living-wage campaigns. We send them in to do voter registration. We send them in to do an actual full-time union rep position. Or organizing, leafleting, whatever it takes so that they can get the real gist of what a union job is all about and to talk to people who are disadvantaged.

So we decided that we were just going to totally flip over organized labor into a new way of thinking and how to organize those people that were unorganized and were a part of the new workforce, and I just happened to fit in a lot of those categories — people of color and women — in the workforce. And it was a very deliberate attempt, a very deliberate attempt. Choosing me, but choosing the new direction of the labor movement.

BANKS NUTTER: And would you say, now that it's been almost ten years, that it has been a success?

CHAVEZ-THOMPSON: It has worked in some areas, yes. Unfortunately, the loss of three million jobs since the Bush administration came in has not helped. Many, many of those jobs have been union jobs and industrialized and manufacturing jobs. We've lost many of the high-paying jobs that have good benefits, that have good pension plans, that were organized years and years ago. We've lost those jobs. A lot of the new jobs are entry-level jobs, minimum-wage jobs, so we haven't quite gotten ourselves to the level of organizing them.

But in the areas where we are organizing, we face many difficult times, because there's now more money being spent by employers to fight the union. There's more union-busting law firms that have popped up all around the country, how to keep the unions out of the work site. There's more jobs that have left here and that have gone to Mexico and from Mexico, they've even gone further down to Bangladesh, Indonesia, and China, so it can be made cheaper. We have employers like Wal-Mart, who order things from companies and say, "We will not

pay you more than \$2.40 even if your cost is \$3, we'll only pay you \$2.40 for them." And those are the difficulties that this economy and the unions are facing in trying to organize workers.

What we find in survey after survey after survey that we've done, is people would love to join the union. They would like protection under contract. They would love the benefits that a union can negotiate, but many of them, of course, are afraid of losing their jobs. The threat of one-on-one meetings or captive-audience meetings is always there and people are scared enough about losing their jobs.

I have a brother-in-law who was working over at United and he was one of the first ones that got laid off. He's been looking for a job for a year and a half and has not found work. He got unemployment for a year but it ran out in December and he says every job, even \$8-an-hour jobs that he goes [for], they say he's over qualified. He says, "I know what they're doing." He says, "I'm 59. They won't hire me but they say I'm over-qualified for the job. So that they don't have to say that I'm too old." And he said, "It's hard." And he gets very, very upset about the fact that he can't find a job.

And so what is happening, we've got a lot of unions that are organizing laundry workers because, of course, laundry here in the United States, you have to wash your clothes here, you can't send it overseas, but the clothing industry is gone. The steel industry is almost gone. Manufacturing jobs, General Electric — all of those jobs. Maytag, I think, is closing a firm in Ohio, sending it to Mexico. Those things are happening in this country and we're losing jobs and a lot of unions are losing their base. That's why we have a lot of mergers, some unions that are talking about merging because that's their only way of survival.

BANKS NUTTER: So, in terms of reaching the rank and file, or potential rank and file who are losing jobs anyway but if they are lucky these days, to have that job in the laundromat or in the restaurant or the nursing home, what's the message that you try to get to them and is it different in any way because it's often women or people of color, in recognition of those barriers?

CHAVEZ-THOMPSON: It's a better life. When you don't have any kind of protection, when you don't have any voice on the job, it's a one-on-one fight. They pick you off. If you speak out, you're gone. With the union, at least you have the right to representation. They may try to pick you off. But you at least have something that backs you up, especially if there's a violation of a contract or personnel policy or anything like that. When you're on your own without that protection, you don't have any chance, even if you're right. If you get demoted because the boss's nephew needs your job — how many times I've been told that: you know, the boss's niece needed a job and she got mine and I had to teach her how to be my supervisor, you know. That kind of story.

Time and time again, workers, people of color, and women get treated less in every aspect. Get paid less in every aspect. Are expected to do more, be more productive because "I gave you a job, you know, you should be grateful." And enough people are saying, you know, that's not enough. I need more than that, and protection and benefits are part of it. I've heard so many stories of people who, you know, were getting \$8 an hour at a hotel in Rio, not Rio, I mean the Rio Hotel in Las Vegas, and the woman is now earning \$11.21 an hour with a union contract with benefits paid by the company, and a 401K. Before, she had to pay for her own insurance. Now she gets the insurance paid for. And said, "I'm never going to work on a nonunion job again." And this is a new immigrant into this country who has those kinds of benefits. It picks people up, it gives them rights, it stops abuses and those are opportunities that only a union can give to people.

Now, one other aspect, we know that not everybody can join a union. We know that everybody may not have the opportunity, there may never be enough money in the union budgets to be able to organize everybody. That's where we then do our coalitions, and our partnerships with organizations like the NAACP, LULAC- League of United Latin American Citizens, or the National Council of La Raza, or the Industrial Areas Foundation. These are groups that get together to talk about affordable housing, to talk about fixing their streets or drainage problems or making their schools better. You know, wherever a community group gets together, they have issues. Those are the same issues our union members go through. If it's your street that needs to be fixed, the fact that you're a member of the union or not makes no difference, you're still a member of that neighborhood. So if you've got a neighborhood association or you belong to a civil rights group or a women's rights group, or any kind of a group, an advocacy group for immigrants. We have something in common. So we have built a coalition of these types of organizations that we can work together on certain issues.

Certainly, when it comes to politics, you know, if it's someone who believes in the same things for workers as they do for women's rights, as they do for, um, making the effort for more police in the neighborhood, that bands a lot of people together on the same issues. Surely we can support one candidate that brings that to all of us.

So those are the kinds of things that I love about this job. That I'm able to work at so many things and bring to the attention of union members and nonunion members, that the AFL-CIO is really trying to be an organization that represents all workers, in particular the ones who pay our dues, but that all workers get a benefit.

I mean, why does the AFL-CIO stand up and fight for increasing the minimum wage? All of our union members earn more than minimum wage. But it's not a living wage, so we coalesce with organizations to

fight for and get living wages so that people can have a little bit better life, a decent life.

Why do we fight for health care? Our union members, 90 percent of them, get really good health coverage, so why should we care? Most of our members have pension plans. Why should we care about social security? Those are the things that people have to realize, that our agenda isn't just about our union members. Yes, they pay us to fight for them for those issues, but we have to fight for all working Americans and that's sometimes what the employers don't want people to know. [laugh]

BANKS NUTTER: Within the AFL-CIO, have these changes been getting resistance?

CHAVEZ-THOMPSON: I don't think there's been resistance. I think probably because of budget constraints, as these are very much tough times for organized labor, some unions are able to divide their budget and put more into organizing. But I don't think there has been a single union that hasn't participated in some level of activism, whether it's Union Cities, whether it's a march in Miami against the Free Trade of the Americas, whether it's a rally to support the striking grocery workers in California. Unions send money. They send support. They send their union members in tee-shirts to show their support. We had 20,000 people in Los Angeles a couple of weeks ago marching on behalf of the grocery workers' strike that's going on in southern California. Those are the kinds of things if they don't have the money to spend in organizing.

But some of the unions who weren't doing a lot of organizing are doing it now. In the construction trades, the roofers, they're going into a predominantly Latino areas where that is where some of the cheap labor for immigrant workers comes in. The roofers' union has done a wonderful, I mean, like a 1000 percent increase in membership in Arizona. They used to have a local that had 15 members. Now it's up to 600 members and most of them are Latinos, if not all of them are Latinos. Then you have the painters' union. The same thing. They have hired more Latinos as organizers to go and organize Latinos that are out in the market doing the painting and can become members. The operating engineers. They have a Hispanic project with organizers and business agents in those positions to where they too are going out and finding the nonunion construction worker who's driving and qualifies to belong to the operating engineers.

Sheetmetal workers: they're organizing. In Houston, they organized a plant, a very, very crazy place where they have one building, they have all Vietnamese. In another building, they have all Mexican or Mexican-Americans. They don't let the two talk to each other. They don't let the two meet up with each other, because they want to make sure that they're separate but each thinks they're being treated better than the other one so that they can keep the union out. So the sheetmetal

workers has hired Latinos, hired a Latino woman to help organize in Houston.

So there are unions who were not doing a lot of organizing who now are doing a lot of organizing. The Laborers' International Union: their top-flight staff is doing more organizing in the immigrant community. Terry O'Sullivan is president, is one of the strongest advocates on the immigration-reform policy, because a lot of his members are affected by it. And when we talk about immigration, we're not talking about the Latinos. We're talking about Polish people who are here, Russian people who are here, people from the European countries that are here that are also undocumented workers and who work at the lowest-paying jobs, and oftentimes are the ones that get abused the most and whose rights need to be protected. So many unions have come into the fight.

Other unions who organize all the time — UNITE, SEIU, AFSCME — it's like standard organizing. That's part of the scenario: the new city that needs to be organized, the new school district, a hospital that needs to be organized. So, they're always organizing, but some of the unions that hadn't organized for a long time, or spent a lot of money, they're doing that now — not to the extent that we'd like to see it, but they are doing it.

BANKS NUTTER: And what about in terms of encouraging other women or people of color or both, to rise up in the ranks, even at a local level?

CHAVEZ-THOMPSON: We do that. We do work, try to work with that whenever we have conferences, whether they're educational, political, any type of training that we have, that we invite unions to send folks. We always try to encourage them to send diverse delegations of their members, and gender, to try to send us a gender-balanced group of people. So, we have the Organizing Institute [OI], who recruits in the Latin American community and the African American community, the Asian American community, to come and see if they have a talent for organizing. I have a young man who is the son of a friend of mine, who called and said, "How do I get into your business? I love what you do. How do you do that?" I said, "Go to an OI class. See if you like it. See if it's something you'd like to do. That's one way to get, you know, get some feeling about this." And so he's going to one in Los Angeles. He's a Latino, and I guess he's about 27, 28, wants a career change. And he says, "I love to talk." And I said, "That's one of the qualifications." And I said, "Go out there and see if, you know."

And the hardest ones to find are Latinos, because they're more reluctant because they don't think they can do it. There's never been anybody out there saying, you can do it, you can do it, you can do it. And so, but when we get them, and then we get good folks, they get snapped up just like this. Unions are just waiting for those folks to come out, and a lot of unions now are looking for third- and fourth-level

leadership to send to the OI, so that they can see whether this person's going to come out a good organizer, and they hire them. And, it's working more and more, because OI is targeting more women and people of color to attend the Organizing Institute training schools, to see if we can pull out some good organizers from there.

BANKS NUTTER: But in terms of leadership positions –

CHAVEZ-THOMPSON: Oh, no, no, no, and we have a lot of people that are going up. Christine Trujillo is the new president of the New Mexico State Federation. We have more women secretary treasurers at the state federation level than we've ever had before. I think that at some point in time, we had maybe two, which was a big number. We had one president of a state federation, now we have one in Florida, we have one in New Mexico, in South Dakota, women who have risen to that level. And we also have women secretary treasurers who I guess you would consider presidents-in-waiting, so that if the time comes that the president moves on, then the secretary treasurer might be considered the candidate for promotion. We have, for the first time in Texas, a woman secretary treasurer, a first in Texas. And Texas is, like, saloon country. I come from there. I can say that.

BANKS NUTTER: You're still the only woman probably at the table much of the time.

CHAVEZ-THOMPSON: Much of the time, but we have a lot of women vice presidents at the Texas AFL-CIO. I was one of them when I was there. And so more women are fighting to get into the higher-level positions, more people of color are coming onto hired and staff director's positions in unions. International presidents are realizing that that is where union membership is going to come from. The new women's director at AFSCME is a woman, a Latino woman who used to work for the Clinton administration and she's turning some of the program around and basically saying, we're going do politics and we're going do organizing.

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BANKS NUTTER: This is the reflections and wrap up piece. I ask folks, “What do you see yourself doing five years from now?” I already got my answer from you, maybe. In a speech you gave at Colorado College in 1999, you started off that speech by announcing your candidacy for the White House in 2008 [laugh] and I’m hoping that we can hold you to that. If that’s still on your horizon, as a candidate, what would your platform be, your top priorities? Who might be your running mate be?

CHAVEZ-THOMPSON: I think I’d have a man be my running mate, so I could track the men’s vote. The men’s vote. We’d need the men’s vote.

BANKS NUTTER: But what do you think you could bring? I know you’ve been involved in the DNC [Democratic National Committee] but what is it that you’d like to bring to national politics that you see perhaps as missing?

CHAVEZ-THOMPSON: Whether it’s national politics or whether we’re talking 2008 or we’re talking 2000-whenever, I want a world where my kids don’t have to do the same thing that I’ve had to do: fight for what’s right, fight for health care, fight for a stable social security, fight for worker’s rights, fight discrimination, fight against the things that happen to poor people and people that don’t have a voice, and that there’ll be an America, there’ll be a place where it’s theirs, because of the fact that they’re citizens of this country and workers and they have rights and those rights are recognized.

Pie in the sky, maybe, maybe not even in my lifetime, but that’s what I would like to have — for workers to have the respect that they deserve, no matter what they get paid, no matter what work they do. All workers should have that respect. A country that sees no color. The dream that Dr. King had. That we could all live and function together and the color of our skin doesn’t matter, but the content in our hearts and the content of who we are and what we are.

The American labor movement has forever advocated equality. They’ve advocated justice and dignity, respect, all absolutely wonderful words. I can’t tell you how many thousands and thousands and thousands of times I’ve used it to recruit people into the union or to explain why I do the things that I do or what the labor movement’s all about. When we talk about every worker should have dignity on the job and respect and not have to be harassed or humiliated or any of those things. Yet every day, you hear of instances where workers are killed because employers don’t pay attention to safety on the work site or workers are fired because they spoke up for what was right, or somebody is discriminated against because she’s a woman or because it’s a person of color, and it’s OK to do those things.

I still would like to wear my rose-colored glasses and think that someday it's going to be that way, that someday it'll happen and that my grandchildren don't have to fight the same battles that I've had to fight, that my grandchildren will not be discriminated against. Their rights will not be abused, that they can walk into a job and just be who they are and what they are and that nobody's going to look at the color of their skin or their heritage or ethnic background or religion or anything like that. And there's a lot of work that needs to be done by people like me for however many years that I spend doing the job that I'm doing now.

The one thing that I don't think I'll ever be, no matter how much I joked I'm running for the White House in 2008 — I don't know that I want to be the king. I like being the king-maker, because I want to hold politicians accountable. I want to hold their feet to the fire and say, "You promised, and if you didn't fulfill the promise, then get the hell out of the way. We want somebody that will fulfill the promise." So I like being king-maker. I don't like being king, because then they hold my feet to the fire [laugh] and I much prefer to do it the other way around.

BANKS NUTTER: Are you currently involved with the Democratic National Committee right now?

CHAVEZ-THOMPSON: I'm the vice-chair of the Democratic National Committee.

BANKS NUTTER: And what does that entail?

CHAVEZ-THOMPSON: It's a fancy title. I do get to speak on behalf of the party at certain times and I participate in meetings where we make decisions about where the party should go in this direction or that direction or, you know, how we're going to handle this convention coming up and that kind of stuff. But because I spend so much time doing my job that pays me my salary, I don't spend as much time doing the Democratic National Committee job of vice-chair. But I enjoy it. It's given me a new perspective as far as politics. It's a lot more difficult, and we've remained neutral as an organization in the Democratic Party as well as the AFL-CIO in not endorsing a candidate in these elections [2004 Democratic primaries], but everything seems to be working out fine. There will be a candidate and we will all get behind that candidate and hopefully win the election in November.

BANKS NUTTER: I assume that the AFL-CIO will endorse someone by the convention...

CHAVEZ-THOMPSON: I think it may be before then, it may be before then that there will be a called meeting of the general board of all the unions and a decision made. We just don't know at this time. Some unions have already come

out but the AFL-CIO has waited until we see whether there is a two-thirds vote of the unions to support one particular candidate.

BANKS NUTTER: Now when you attend something like that, the DNC meetings, what hat do you wear?

CHAVEZ-THOMPSON: I wear two hats when I'm at the DNC. I wear the labor hat and I wear the Hispanic hat, because we feel that there aren't enough Hispanics in the DNC. We have a lot of Hispanics in the party, but they're not represented in the organization. We have less than 50 people of Hispanic origin in a group of about 480 people. So that's a very small percentage compared to the electorate that is out there. And so we're working very hard as part of the Hispanic caucus, we're working very hard to increase those numbers. As a labor representative, I want to make sure that they hold their meetings in union hotels, that they use union services when we do any functions, that we keep to all of the guidelines that the labor movement wants, and that they pass some of the things that we want in the platform of the Democratic party. Although after the president gets elected, nobody pays attention to the platform, but it's very important to put the platform together.

BANKS NUTTER: Yes — so you'll have an active role in the platform?

CHAVEZ-THOMPSON: Yes. Right now, as we speak, we're putting names together to recommend to the chair of the Democratic National Committee, to place people on the various committees, you know, of the convention, so we will be recommending some names.

BANKS NUTTER: Well, I know where you'll be in July. You said that with the DNC, you see yourself as wearing two hats, as a labor person and as a Hispanic and obviously, as a Hispanic woman, do you feel that in your long and accomplished career, is there any particular turning point that you felt you were a part of?

CHAVEZ-THOMPSON: I don't know how to answer that. I get scared a little, because when I got elected to this position, all the Latinos thought I was the answer to their prayers and that I would deliver for them. Women, the same thing. People of color, the same thing. I was instrumental along with another vice president of the AFL-CIO, Gloria Johnson, in helping to form the Pride at Work constituency group for gay, lesbian, and transgendered union members to have an organization that speaks for them within the AFL-CIO. I've been a part of so much change, I think, within the labor movement. Constituency groups that are represented, six of them that represent different segments of the labor movement, people of color, women. We've promoted and had programs accepted that nobody thought we could get done.

But I sometimes hesitate giving myself credit for all of that, because it couldn't have been done without a John Sweeney, or a Richard Trumka for believing in the same things that I believe in, and we do things together. It's a team effort, and we do these things together and they couldn't happen if it weren't for the leadership of John Sweeney and the things that he brings to the table. None of these things could happen. So I don't like to give myself credit for that. I think it's just a dream, a dream that when I leave, it'll be a better world for the union members, but also for a lot of people that we touched with the programs that we did, whether it's labor in the pulpit, whether it's Union Summer.

I remember one young lady with the Union Summer in Boston. I had a private meeting with about fifteen of the Union Summer kids, I was asking them how did you get here and why did you want to come, and one young lady said, "Well, my parents didn't want me to come. They're antiunion, and every conversation at the dinner table was against the union, and I heard about this [Union Summer] and I wanted to see what it was all about." And she said, "I told them I wanted to come, and it just drove them up the wall. But I'm 18," she said, "and I wanted to come and I could have come because I was 18, but they finally had to give in and they let me come." And I said, "So what have you learned?" Well, she talked about a living wage, she talked about visiting people in their homes, where there were two families, three families, living in a three-bedroom home, that kind of stuff. And so I said to her, I said, "So when you go back home," I said, "do you think it'll make any difference with your parents, what you learned, and that that isn't just that unions are bad and how bad we are?" And she thought about it for a second, and she said, "Maybe not, but it's going to make for some interesting dinner conversation." And I laughed, because we changed her mind. For 18 years, she heard nothing but antiunion from her parents. She came for a summer and saw and something changed.

In Arizona, I did a teach-in and I talked about — meaning the students — your responsibility. I'm doing this. This is my job. I'm doing this. I said, "What are you going to do? What are you going to have when you come out of college? I'm trying to protect what you have now. What are you going to do to protect what you have?" About a year later, two years later, I go to Cleveland and I run into this young woman and she says, "I know you don't remember me, but I was at the Arizona teach in." I said, "Oh, wow, that's nice." She said, "When you left, you asked, 'What are you going to do?' And I changed my major." She says, "I'm working for UNITE. I graduated, I'm working for UNITE as an organizer." I said, "How wonderful." She said, "You made me change my mind." Oh, my God. I must have floated around for a week, because of what she said.

And then, two years after that, I went back to Cleveland for Labor Day, and I ran into her again and she said, "Do you remember me?" I said, "Yes. You're with UNITE?" She said, "I'm not with UNITE

anymore.” I said, “So where are you now?” She says, “I’m on the staff of Congressman Dennis Kucinich.” I said, “Oh, my God.” I said, “What a change in the last 4, 5 years.” And she said, “And I still remember what you said, and I’m still trying to do what you said.”

If I have changed the life of one person, one student, one Latino who decides to get into the union business and work up or a woman who says if Linda can do it, with her limited education, with her limits as a person of color, whatever they may think my limitations were, if I can have influenced that one person, I’ve been successful. My work has produced something.

In England, I saved a marriage. I know this is going to sound crazy. I went to England to represent the AFL-CIO one year after the 9/11 and they had a ceremony and I spoke and I spoke from the heart about the heartbreak of the deaths of these 643 union members who died and I talked about my daughter and I talked about, you know, the sacrifices that we make and I cried and forgot that we were on BBC, all over the United Kingdom. And this young man, that afternoon, came up to me and said, “May I give you a hug?” a very prim and proper Englishman and I said, “Of course.” And he hugged me and said, “You saved my marriage.” And I said, “And how did I do that?” and he said, “My wife hates that I go to all of these conferences and conventions and meetings and she just doesn’t like the hours that I put in. And she was watching BBC when you were talking about the things that we do for others and the sacrifices that we make for others, and she called me crying to say that ‘Maybe I don’t like that you’re gone, but I think I understand now why you do it.’ And she said, ‘That woman just made me cry when I saw her on TV.’” And he said to her, “You saw her on TV. I was there. I heard her. I saw her.” And she said she had the whole place crying. And he said she said, “Maybe I don’t like you being gone but I understand why you do it.” He said, “You saved my marriage.” And I thought to myself, Whoa. I’m going to put that one in the books because I’ve saved a marriage. A man actually came up to me.

And another one, a very elderly English man, comes up and he says, “I’d like to hug you.” English people don’t hug a lot.

BANKS NUTTER: You’re getting hugs all over the place.

CHAVEZ-THOMPSON: I’m getting hugged, OK? And so he hugged me and he said, “There’s two women who have made me cry in my life.” He says, “My mother and you.” And I said, “I’m sorry.” And he said, “Oh, no.” and he says, “I needed to hear what you said,” he said, “because we often don’t get told why we do this and you brought it home to us.” I had a blast. They were just absolutely wonderful to me. But if we change one life, if I’ve changed somebody’s way of thinking, if I’ve brought a little justice, if I’ve talked to somebody about what equality means and then whatever sacrifices and whatever maybe things that I’ve lost because of the time I

didn't spend with my children or my first marriage that I had that didn't work, I think I've been a success.

BANKS NUTTER: I would agree. Have there been any stands that you've taken at any point in your career that were controversial, maybe more so than you thought it might be?

CHAVEZ-THOMPSON: I can't think of one. I'm sure there's one, but I just can't think of it.

BANKS NUTTER: Say the Pride at Work?

CHAVEZ-THOMPSON: No. There were some who were opposed to it but they were good union brothers and said, "Look. We don't like it but we won't oppose it." And it went through. It was approved, but there was no real, real big controversy. So — I can't think of one, not right now.

BANKS NUTTER: You very eloquently shared your vision of social justice, and what I see from your career and the way you talk about this — you've got the labor movement in which you're actively working on these issues, also you're part of the Hispanic Congressional Caucus, and party politics in the Democratic party — is there any of these particular venues that seem to be the most receptive in achieving social change?

CHAVEZ-THOMPSON: The labor movement.

BANKS NUTTER: What is it about the labor movement that makes it the most effective?

CHAVEZ-THOMPSON: We give voice to people who don't have a voice. We give hope. You know, when we talk about dignity, respect, justice, equality, we sometimes forget hope. And hope is what it's all about. That if you can make all these things happen, you're giving the people the opportunity to hope that there's a better tomorrow. The opportunity to hope that their families will have a better life, that they will be able to provide a better life because they belong to the union or because they become active in their community — whatever they might do, it makes no difference what they do. When you give people hope, you're giving them a lot more than if you do things for them. You can teach them, but if you give them hope, you've accomplished a lot, and that's, I think, one of the things that we try to do. At least, that's one of the things that I try to do. Give people hope that tomorrow's going to be better, but they're going have to put some effort into it as well.

BANKS NUTTER: Today, would you consider yourself a feminist? Would you call yourself that?

CHAVEZ-THOMPSON: Yes, oh yes.

BANKS NUTTER: Was there any point in time which you realized, yes, I am a feminist, that you remember?

CHAVEZ-THOMPSON: I don't know. It's colored a little bit by my culture and my ethnic background, because very early on, even taking the job of a union rep, traveling as I did, leaving my daughter weeks at a time with my mother, to do a job that a woman, a Latino woman, did not do, I think way back in the 70s, I decided that I was going to do it and nothing would stop me. So I haven't had to fight the demons since then because I fought them very early on. The rumors of my sleeping around, or how many politicians I smiled at and whether I was sleeping with any of them or how I got promoted — all of those things were the demons I faced as a younger woman, and I think I managed to keep my reputation. I know I managed to keep my marriage together, the first marriage even though it ended in divorce, had nothing to do with the rumors and, was a casualty of nothing more than two people grown apart and who now are the best of friends. We share two children and we share two adorable grandchildren and we're the best of friends, so we never split on that issue. So I got past that hurdle of being a feminist and being a woman in a job that a man normally has back in the 70s, so I don't think I've had to fight that. But that's one of the questions that I get asked the most by many union women and many organizations of women that I speak to is, "How do you do it? How do you break through that male thinking that you don't belong there, that the union is no place for a woman, that you should be home cooking and having babies and leave the union business to men?" And it's probably one of the toughest questions, as I said before. Tough skin.

Don't wear your feelings on your shirtsleeve and if you cry, don't let them see you cry. Go home and cry, but don't let them see you cry. Many a time I went home. One time I was the brunt of a meeting where we were trying to put together unity, and I confronted an iron worker and said, "I understand you called me a bulldozer." And he said, "Yes." And I said, "Would you mind telling me what that was all about?" and he says, "Yes, I told somebody don't get in Linda's way, she's like a bulldozer. She'll run right over you." And I thought about that for a second and I said, "Well, I might just take that as a compliment." And I walked away. I went home and cried, because it was a way of insulting me, even though I tried to turn it into a compliment.

And the next day, I called him and I said, "Kenny, I want to go to lunch." "What?" I said, "I want to take you to lunch." I said, "It'll be a public place, Kenny," I said, "You know, let's go have lunch. I want to talk to you. I dare you." So we went to lunch. And I said, "I know you guys hate me." It was the building trades. "But let me tell you what I have to do to get attention. You hate me because I'm on TV, I'm on the radio, I'm in the newspapers." I said, "I don't have collective bargaining. I have collective begging." I said, "It depends on whether I

have six votes on the city council or whether the city manager talks to me or not. If I have a six-vote majority,” I said, “the city manager will talk to me. If he doesn’t think I’ve got the votes, he can ignore me.” I said, “I file grievances and two months later, the supervisor hasn’t answered because he feels he doesn’t have to.” I said, “If I’m not on TV, if I’m not embarrassing them in some way in some fashion, if I’m not putting a story in the paper for public sympathy and public opinion to turn to my side,” I said, “I can’t get it done.” I said, “If a supervisor can fire somebody, because in Texas we have at-will employees, the only thing I can depend on is a civil service law or a personnel policy that they might violate and I can catch them on it.” And I said, “And the only way I can do that is to be out front, be public, be available to anybody who wants to jam a microphone in my face.” I said, “I’ll do it.” I said, “You’ve got a union contract.” I said, “If somebody’s doing your work, you shut the place down.” I said, “Somebody isn’t getting their pay, you shut the place down. I don’t have that ability.” And he says, “Oh really?” and I explained to him every bit of the law that says I can’t do anything. No work stoppages, no strikes for city employees or public employees in Texas, et cetera.

He ended up being one of my best friends, because he understood. And he says, “Well, you’re still like a bulldozer.” I said, “I know.” I said, “Don’t get in my way or I’ll run right over you, Kenny.” He says, “Oh, I know that.” And whenever we went to a Central Labor Council meeting, the trades found out we were friends, I’d walk in and somebody would lean over to Kenny and say, “Hey, Kenny, there’s your girlfriend.” Because they just didn’t understand why Kenny ended up liking me, but it was one of those things when I said, “I’ve had enough. I’ve had enough. I don’t have to prove myself to anybody.” But that night, like I said, I went home and I cried and I’m saying to myself, “Why do I want to go back and do this tomorrow?” But tomorrow, the next day, I’d wake up and I’d say, “Here I go again.” And go right back into it.

BANKS NUTTER: And what was the answer to why?

CHAVEZ-THOMPSON: I loved and still love to see the faces of people when changes come to their lives because of the union. This woman I represented was a nutritionist. She had a college degree, and had been fighting and fighting and fighting to get an upgrade, and I represented her. I presented her case and she got a \$2,000-a-year increase in salary. I did my job. That’s what I was paid to do because she was paying dues.

Two days later, on my desk, I came back from a meeting, on my desk was this terrarium with a little duck and it looked like a little pond and it’s all dirt painted and blue and all this kind of stuff. And I looked and I said, “What’s this? What happened?” My secretary said, “Laura came and dropped it off.” I said, “What?” She said, “It was her only

way of saying ‘thank you.’” “Oh.” I was flabbergasted. Sometimes it was just a card, a little thank you note. “You believed in me. Thank you so much for what you did. You saved my job.” Or, a union member with tears in his eyes who would come and say, “They want to suspend me for six days. My kids won’t be able to eat. Can you help me?” And I’d get it reduced to a reprimand or a two-day suspension. I’d do something, because I believed in him. I mean, that’s why I’ve done it.

My grandfather told me one time, “Don’t do anything that isn’t in your heart and that you can’t stomach.” And he was pretty outspoken about a lot of things, but he had me pegged right. I care about other people. I care about my family, and I figured if I do something for other people, I’m also doing it for my family. And that’s it.

BANKS NUTTER: Now, you’re on many boards and your day job is more than a day job. Is there any one of those affiliations in particular that you most enjoy or find most rewarding?

CHAVEZ-THOMPSON: I do a lot of work with some of the community groups, the National Committee for Community and Justice, the NCCJ, does a lot of good work within the community for funding equalization, when it comes to affordable housing and the way people get treated. I served on the President’s Commission for Diversity, President Clinton appointed me to that. Anything that allows me to continue the same work that I do here. Equality, justice, dignity for people. The Congressional Hispanic Caucus also does a lot of work to raise money for scholarships for young interns to come work in Washington, DC, Latinos from around the country to come here and participate in the political process, work for different congressional offices, and intern with those offices to learn and become tomorrow’s leaders. I think that’s probably one of the programs I like the best, because I get to meet all of the interns. I get an opportunity and oftentimes, I run into them when I go to their states and they say, “You came to speak to us,” or “You’re on the board and I’m now working here, I’m working there.” Several of them might even run for office. I can’t think of one that’s been elected, but they’ve run for office. They are thinking of tomorrow’s leaders, and I enjoy that the most.

BANKS NUTTER: I can’t imagine you have a lot of spare time, but what do you in your downtime, most enjoy doing?

CHAVEZ-THOMPSON: I read a lot. I’ve got a lot of books, try to finish them on airplanes flying to and from, and occasionally when I have some downtime at home, which isn’t too often, I do a lot of traveling. But airplane rides are the best places to take a book, and do some reading before you nap, and I do try to nap whenever I can. So reading mostly, and my grandchildren. They’re the best hobby anybody can have. How often and how much

can I spoil them, and after I spoil them or after I spend some time with them, my daughter says it takes her a week to get them straightened out. That's her job.

BANKS NUTTER: I guess that's sort of where I'd like to end. You mentioned your granddaughter a few times, not to slight your grandson but what would you like to say to your granddaughter in terms of the world you'd like her to have and the part she can play in it?

CHAVEZ-THOMPSON: I would want her to be whatever she wants to be. Have no limitations. Think high. Strike high. You know, it's whatever she wants to be. The world is hers. When my daughter was pregnant and my grandson was almost 9 — it's almost the same as mine, eleven years between my kids, for her it was nine years between her two children, and I asked her, I said, "Do you think it's going to be a girl?" She said, "I don't know, Mom, I really want it to be a girl." So when she, about two months from having the baby, she called me, she says, "Mom, we've decided on a name." and I said, "Oh, good. What's her name?" She said, "Lydia Maria." I started to cry.

My name is Lydia. And my first grade teacher changed my name. Don't ask me why. Back in West Texas, teachers could change names. My brother Felipe ended up being Philip. My cousin Jose ended up being Joe. Linda? I-I-I have no idea why. But everything in my school records and everything else is Linda. But my real name is Lydia. So when my daughter said, "I'm naming her Lydia for you and Maria for her other grandmother," I just cried because nobody's ever going to change her name.

She'll be Lydia all of her life, and the best advice that I could possibly give her is never lose her spirit. Never lose her wanting to be more. We have to hold her back right now because she thinks that at 6½, she can do the same things that her 15-year-old brother can do, and we try to tell her that no, she cannot, only because we think we're trying to keep her safe, because she wants to do everything her brother does. But I hope that we never hold her back from any kind of dream that she has, any kind of ability that she's able to learn. She certainly has my mouth, because she speaks up for herself, stands up for herself, stands her ground, gets in trouble in school because of it, but as she grows up, as she has every opportunity that I can possibly hope to give her, whether it's education or ability to get into whatever she feels like she wants to do, those are my hopes for her, as well as my grandson. But I think that hopefully, those of us who are here now are making life a little better so that she can fulfill any dream that she wants to have.

BANKS NUTTER: I think you've done more than your share. Thank you.

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