Nevada Test Site Oral History Project
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Interview with Sandie Medina

January 25, 2005
Las Vegas, Nevada

Interview Conducted By
Suzanne Becker

Oral history is a method of collecting historical information through recorded interviews conducted by an interviewer/researcher with an interviewee/narrator who possesses firsthand knowledge of historically significant events. The goal is to create an archive which adds relevant material to the existing historical record. Oral history recordings and transcripts are primary source material and do not represent the final, verified, or complete narrative of the events under discussion. Rather, oral history is a spoken remembrance or dialogue, reflecting the interviewee's memories, points of view and personal opinions about events in response to the interviewer's specific questions. Oral history interviews document each interviewee's personal engagement with the history in question. They are unique records, reflecting the particular meaning the interviewee draws from her/his individual life experience.

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Table of Contents

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[00:00:00] Begin Track 2, Disc 1.

Suzanne Becker: *If you could just start with your name and some background about you, where you're from, maybe a little bit about your family, how you made your way out to Las Vegas, or if you're from Las Vegas, your background.*

Sandie Medina: My name is Sandie A. Medina. I was born and raised in Santa Fe, New Mexico. I attended Loretto Academy in Santa Fe.

Which academy?

Loretto Academy–High School. It is now closed. It closed in 1968 when I graduated. After graduation, I went to New Mexico Highlands University and I studied elementary education and child technology. I am an only girl. I have one brother, and a sister-in-law and three nieces and nephews. After college, I came out here to the [Nevada] test site.

Basically what I did is, I went to Hawaii for two months with my sorority sister. My goal was to get my master's degree within five years. I was an early graduate from high school, so I was only fifteen when I went into college. I didn't turn sixteen until two months later. So by the time I was twenty, my goal was to have my master's. I went gung-ho, carrying twenty to twenty-four credit hours and going year-round. I was burned out a little bit, so I went to Hawaii and oh, I just need a break. I need a break.

So at that time, I came out to Las Vegas. My grandmother and grandfather lived here, and my mother had four sisters and four [brothers-in-law] that lived out here in Las Vegas. So I came out to visit Grandma and I figured, well, I'm just going to go take the test for REECo [Reynolds

Electrical and Engineering Company]. I'd never had a job in my life. Basically I've only had two jobs in my lifetime: the Nevada Test Site and what I'm presently doing.

So I took the test for REECo. There was a big strike going on. I spent a month here, I went back to New Mexico, and I got a call the last of September if I wanted to come out here to work. I had not [yet] gone into the fall semester of college. I just basically wanted a break.

That was it.

Yes, I wanted a break. I convinced my mommy and my daddy to let me have one semester off. They said fine. So I came out here and got hired, money on the spot, and never have been back since. I've lived in Las Vegas thirty-four years.

Wow! So you've seen some changes?

Yes, a lot of changes.

What were you hired to do at REECo?

My first job, I was just a clerk-typist.

OK. Is that what you took the test for?

Yes. I took the test for clerical. Well, it was just basically a typing test, and then an interview. Being that I had never worked anywhere else, it was no problem.

But I took the typing test, passed it, and I got hired as a clerk-typist. I worked only forty days as a clerk-typist, and then there was a senior clerk position available in Area 12. The way REECo used to work then is you could not bid out on another position until your probation period was over. You had to wait ninety days. But being that I had never worked anywhere and I bid on it, they would rather hire somebody in company than go out of company. So I went to Area 12 forty days after I started out at the test site. I remained in Area 12, in Field Operations

Department, Department of Defense [DoD], twenty-five years. I handled all administrative and clerical support for all underground testing, twenty-five years.

What kind of clearance did you need for that?

I had a top secret clearance. I got my Q-clearance within three months and my top secret clearance within six months. Because I'd never worked anywhere. I'd only been back home, to college and out here.

So you didn't have much of a history, then.

No, I don't. So I went from clerk-typist to senior clerk to administrative clerical assistant, supervise—

How was that? How'd you feel about that? Was that exciting or was it just fairly run-of-the-mill?

Yes, I enjoyed my job. And basically that I'm single. I have never married. No children. I used to get up at three in the morning, catch my bus at 4:15, and I'd get home seven at night.

From Las Vegas, you'd catch the bus out to the test site.

[00:05:00] From Las Vegas. I commuted 250 miles a day for twenty-five years. And during my whole twenty-five years I was out there, I kept a room there. I kept a room there with three, four changes [of clothes] because there were times that I wouldn't even be able to come home. With a lot of pre-and-post-shot events, many times I was not able to come home at all.

Can you describe a little bit what you did—your job description?

At the Nevada Test Site? It was handling all administrative for all the supervisors, and that included all the superintendents, mechanical, electrical, the project managers. Plus I did the time cards. At that time, we had *daily* time cards, and at one time we had up to eight hundred of them. So those had to be done *daily*. All the reports had to be out to the tunnel walkers or whoever was filling out the cards. They had to be brought into my office. I had to check them all, oversee them

completely, make sure that they were picked up that day, because the cards were done on a daily basis. Plus covered the phone, and at one time I oversaw—there was about four different tunnel operations going on, so I would go from tunnel to tunnel to help the other clerical support.

So you got to see a lot at the test site.

Yes, I did. Well, all of Area 12, and a lot of the other areas. I was in a lot of the other areas, but I was based out of Area 12.

What were your thoughts, working at the test site at that time? Did you ever think about issues of radiation or health issues?

That never even crossed my mind any way at all until I took this position that I'm in now [Union Project Manager, NTS Medical Surveillance Project Office, Southern Nevada Building & Construction Trades Council]. At that time, it was just [an] excellent job. I enjoyed the people. They became my friends. Like Bill Flangas tells everybody, `I raised her from a pup.` They were my family. I spent more time with these guys on the bus. And as far as the diseases that we're testing for now, with the position I'm in now, [it] never crossed my mind any way at all.

And they never talked about that?

No, that was *never* discussed. I think if it would have been, they wouldn't have had the workers there. The guys would not have worked. If they knew now, the illnesses and the funerals and everything that I've been to, if the guys knew when we were working out there, they wouldn't have worked. So everything was hush-hush. Even a lot of the—unless they were *really* high up, I think were in the red about everything going on, as well.

But you think they had an idea that this was—

Oh, they had to. Definitely. Yes. They had to. Especially when you hear the stories from some of these guys now where they would pull their badges or have them put their badges in a bucket,

and—why are they doing that? [They were told,]`Pick up your badges on your way out. Put your badges underneath your clothing.` Just different things that they've had them do. The stories have been astronomical. And I worked there in the office and didn't even really know all this—what was going on.

Well, and why would you?

Why would I? Right. Everything was just a big high powers-that-be.

It's interesting. Other folks I've talked to have talked about this. Some have never even had access to some of their records.

Right.

And I find that [a] pretty consistent thread.

That's even hard right now. A lot of these guys are requesting their medical records, and they get their medical records, but they're only giving them what they want to give them. They're not getting everything that they should. So it's really hard, in retrospect, when they've got these compensation claims going. And what can you do? There's nothing much they can do.

Now how did you transition from the test site into this job that you have now?

I left the Nevada Test Site December of '95 when REECo demised. I was not picked up by Bechtel [Nevada] when Bechtel took over January 1st in '96. I *did* get called back with Bechtel in March of '96, and I worked with them until September of '96. I resigned from Bechtel and took this position. And the way I found this position is because the business manager at that time, Robert Trenkel [sp], who's a *very* dear friend of mine, he's the one that started the **[00:10:00]** program with Dr. [Lewis] Pepper from Boston University [BU]. He knew I was out of work. I had been hired back with Bechtel as what they refer to as a temp. Ten dollars an hour. And no benefits, nothing. They basically would call me when they wanted me. I was very discouraged,

and Rob had told me to hold in there. He was working on something. He says, You are the perfect person for it, but I can't tell you about it. So finally in August he told me it was a go, the program was going to start October 1st. And at that time when I knew this position was going to come up, Bechtel did offer me a *full*-time position out at the test site.

Interesting. What did they offer you?

About a couple dollars more than what I had left REECo with. But I refused it.

And what type of position was it?

It was clerical supervisor, and I refused it. But they were not aware of this position I had. So in a way, I'm glad I did because that job was demised in December. So if I would have taken that position, I would've been without a job in December and this one would have gone by the wayside. So I took this job, as I stated, October 1st of '96.

Wow. And what officially is the title of this job?

Union Project Manager. I joined the union. I belong to the Laborers' Local 872.

This is for the Southern Nevada Building and Construction Trade Councils?

Yes, my paycheck is signed from Southern Nevada Building and Construction Trades Council, but I work in affiliation with Boston University and the University of California, San Francisco [UCSF].

OK. And you're the medical surveillance—?

It's a medical screening program for former Nevada Test Site workers.

Can you talk about it a little bit, the origins, its evolution and your growth with it?

Well, as I stated, it was started with Rob Trenkel and Dr. Pepper. We are one of twelve cooperative agreements that were funded by the Department of Energy [DOE] to do this research. We test Nevada Test Site participants, anybody that worked out there between the years

of 1951 and 1992. And they worked at NRDS [Nuclear Rocket and Development Station], which is the nuclear rocket development era. They worked here at Losee Road in the B-building [DOE offices in North Las Vegas]. Worked in underground testing, atmospheric, to drill holes for the shafts. They just had to work out there one year or longer in order to be qualified for our screening. And that's males, females.

Are there time frames on this?

Nineteen fifty-one to 1992.

The whole history of the test site.

Yes, the whole time. Had to work out there for one year or more. The reason we do that is because for the compensation program. We test everybody for radiation, asbestos, silicosis, diesel exhaust, thyroid disease, hearing loss, and for beryllium. And if they were to come up, let's say, for beryllium or silicosis, and they were out there less than a year, they're not eligible for the compensation. To date we've done about close to thirty-five hundred people. We have another screening coming up now in April, which is basically supposed to be our last screening *unless* we get funded again and DOE continues the project. And this is what I'm working really hard on right now with all the participants and the unions. I *hate* to see this program stop. There's *so* much more work to be done.

Right. Was it originally set up just to have a limited life span?

It was set up for five years and we've been getting a year-to-year extension, but now DOE is basically going to stop all the programs.

Any idea why?

[No response]

No.

How do you contact people, or do they contact you?

Through the unions. I work closely with the business managers, but a lot of it has been—I knew a lot of people. Being out there twenty-five years, you *know* a *lot* of the guys. So when it first started, I had addresses of a lot of people. And by word of mouth. We have also gotten lists from the Department of Motor Vehicles, which has helped immensely. With DOL [Department of Labor], the resource center is sending us a lot of people, as well. I work very closely with them.

Right.

[00:15:00] End Track 2, Disc 1.

[00:00:00] Begin Track 3, Disc 1.

There are specifically various types of cancers that would make people eligible, if that's the right word, for compensation.

Right. We don't test for cancer. If the doctor—

Just the radiation—

Radiation, asbestos, silicosis, diesel exhaust, thyroid disease, the hearing loss, and beryllium. We've only been testing for beryllium since 2002, but cancer we do not test for. Now if the doctors were to see something, especially in the lungs, they would contact the individual and tell them that they need to proceed further, to see somebody else.

And then there are different types of compensation program for the cancer.

Well, basically there's only—oh, for the cancer, no, there is only the one. The Las Vegas Resource Center.

What type of compensation are they eligible for?

It's $150,000 one-time payment, tax-free, plus they get ongoing medical expenses.

And is that just to the actual person, or is that to family members?

They have changed the law. It is now for spouses and children. If the spouses are deceased, then it goes to the children.

What is the process that folks need to go through in order to come into the program?

They just contact me. There's a form that we call our "initial contact form." We get their demographic information, and by that form I make the decision if they should be tested for beryllium or not, which three-fourths of the people are. But anything less than a year, we notify them by phone or by mail that they're not eligible for the program. [When] they call us, we get all this information: `Did you work out there a year or not?`, so that we don't have to send a notification packet. If it was less than a year, we let them know at that time.

Can you talk about generally the types of folks that you get? Where are the areas that most of the people that come through your program, where have they been?

When we first started, it was all Area 12. Then as the program progressed, we were getting a lot of people [from] what we referred to as the Flats, which is Area[s] 2, 3, and 6. *Now* we're getting a lot of participants from the NRDS era, which was 1951 to basically 1962, and Losee Road. People that worked downtown here in Las Vegas at Losee Road. Even if you were just a secretary, a clerk, or whatever, but did work in those B-buildings, they are qualified for our program. That has only been added within the last year-and-a-half, Losee Road, after the one person that they found with the beryllium. So we test everybody there now.

[00:03:09] End Track 3, Disc 1.

[00:00:00] Begin Track 4, Disc 1.

It seems like, given the longevity of the test site, that these programs are fairly recent and seem—in your opinion were they slow to come about? Or were the [in] the works for a while?

The Cold War ended in 1992. The last underground test was Hunters Trophy, [18] September of ’92. [Hunter’s Trophy was the last tunnel test conducted at Area 12. The last test at the NTS was Divider, a shaft test in Area 3, on 09/23/1992]. Of course Chemical Kiloton was done September of ’93 at P-Tunnel. But they wouldn’t have had a program like this while they were still doing underground testing. It was after the Cold War.

Sure. I guess if they had had a program like you’d said earlier, they may not have had a—

No, we would not have had any underground testing either.

The folks that come through, what is their sense? How do they feel about this juxtaposition of having worked out at the test site and now, as a result, they’re ill?

A lot of them have stated to me, `Let’s face it. We all worked out there.` They didn’t mind the trip. The pay was excellent. The benefits and the pay were excellent, which [was] not [like] anything that you could get in Las Vegas. They feel like I do. I think that if one would have known what they were working with, the chemicals and everything, they would not have had people. And a lot of them are really discouraged, but who’s to say that it came from there? A lot of these guys worked all around. I mean I can see the ones that started at the test site and retired from the test site. But a lot of these guys that work on what they called travel cards; they would go from place to place. So I think this is a big thing right now with that dose reconstruction. They have to prove that it did come from the Nevada Test Site, which in some cases they have and, others—it’s just further research on it.

When you refer to “dose reconstruction,” can you explain that?

Dose reconstruction, that’s done from our badges. We had a dosimetry badge and it was changed out every three months, or monthly. From what I’m finding out now, there were many cases that

they were changed out *daily*, depending on some of the areas or the hot spots that the guys were working in. I was not aware of [that] until after I took this job.

Right. And you were out there while that was going on.

I was out there, yes. But I was not in the tunnels. I worked in the office. I would go underground maybe once a month, *if* at all that much. Basically I didn't go underground. I was very claustrophobic.

But you've been in the tunnels.

Oh yes, I've been inside every single one of them.

What is that like?

It's very scary. Like I stated, I get claustrophobic knowing that there's only one way out.

And these are deep.

Yes. Well, they go right in, underneath the mountain, straight in. Not down. Now the down holes, I have never been [in], other than the shaft, 15-shaft. But the tunnels are scary. I would never be one to be a craftsperson like a lot of the operator girls. I was offered the position *many*, many times but I turned them down because of my claustrophobia.

Sure. That makes sense.

I didn't care for underground at all.

But you were out there twenty-five years and probably witnessed or were involved in a lot of tests?

Yes. Yes.

What was that like? What was it like on test days, or preparing for a test?

Oh, preparing for a test was a *lot*, a lot of paperwork. It was our responsibility to get the reentry teams together, make sure they were notified when they had to report. When they didn't, the

other ones we had to furlough, because daily time cards still had to be done, event or no event. I was not at the tunnel itself. I was usually at a holding place in Mercury. And in later years they had us in a holding place in a trailer at the Yucca Lake. But most of the time, I was in Mercury.

And how many people generally were involved in a test?

Oh, my goodness. Depending on the time period, at one time we had over eight hundred people working three shifts.

To prepare for a test.

Yes.

That's a lot of people.

Yes. In the mid-eighties, it was very, *very* busy because we were working on one, and then starting on another one, so you had to have people working in both areas.

[00:05:00] *You had mentioned a little bit earlier that you're almost doing two different—at opposite ends of the job spectrum from the test site to this [project].*

Yes.

How is that? I mean it doesn't sound like you have many regrets about working at the test site.

No, I loved working at the Nevada Test Site. What is hard to take now is all the illnesses. I'm going to be honest, since the first of January I've attended four funerals. I just went to one last week. And that's hard for me because I knew these people. I knew these people and it's *really*, really hard. There [are] so many sick. *So* many of them that are sick. And you're just seeing them going further down, down, down. And that's hard to take. In the back of my mind—is this what the test site has done to these poor people? That's what's sad. Thank God I'm in good health, still. But who's to say—?

Do you think that the public is aware of this?

I think there's been enough *publicity* about it. I wish there was more publicity about our *program*, personally, and more so right now. They're looking at shutting us down. What's going to happen to everybody? Who are they going to turn to? Where are they going to go? There's not going to be *anybody* out here to help them. Not *anybody* to help them. They are supposed to be working on some kind of a national screening program, but it's not going to be like the guys come here to Vegas and see the excellent doctors that we have from BU and UCSF to do the screenings. I just think it's horrible what DOE is trying to do. And *we* have been *all* the project. I'm bragging. But what I hear from my other colleagues is that we've been the ones that have done the most. We have *done* the most of *any* of the projects.

So it's been a successful program.

Yes, it has.

Why do you think that they're shutting it down?

I think due to funding. And I figure, what is it? These are people's lives at stake. That's what really gets me. It's their lives at stake. I'm not saying that it was all the Nevada Test Site, but at least they have a place to turn to, where to go to find out.

So you said this is a research program that's in conjunction with BU.

Yes. Well, it is Boston University and the University of California, San Francisco. Why they put it at Southern Nevada Building and Construction Trades Council—that was me. I joined the union and they had to have somebody from Las Vegas to handle the other paperwork that needed to be done with it. And like I said, when I took the position, many of the guys that I was talking to, `Well, what union do you belong to?` I would say, `Union Project Manager,` but I was not ever union. I joined the union when I took this job.

Which is good. So you weren't unionized out at the test site.

No. I was what they referred to as NIMBU. Non-union, non-exempt.

OK, but many of the miners and engineers were unionized.

Everybody had—no, not engineers.

Not the engineers.

No. Some of the engineers were out of IBEW [International Brotherhood of Electrical Workers] but as far as the office staff itself, they were all non-union. *Everybody*, all crafts, *had* to be union. You could not work out there unless you were union. Now see, I worked in the construction part of it. The unions have a maintenance contract and they have a construction contract. I worked with all the construction, underground construction.

Now you just handle test site employees.

Yes.

Not the Downwinders.

Oh yes, those are Downwinders. That's NRDS. Yes, those are Downwinders. Atmospheric.

What we refer to as—

OK. Right. Where do a majority of those folks come from?

Downwinders is everything other than Clark County.

So you get a lot of folks from—

When we first started the program, they had what they referred to as a RECA program, which is a Radiation Exposure Compensation Act. That was before the EEOICPA [Energy Employees Occupational Illness Compensation Program Act] program came into effect. That's where the Downwinders came in. I was still working with just the **[00:10:00]** medical screening, but I have access to all the forms. So by word of mouth, people found out that I have the forms. And then I

was taught how to fill out the forms, so I had many people come in here and I helped a lot of people with that. With the RECA program, as well.

OK. So particularly, this has only been going for five years, it's—

No, we've been—the program started—

Since '96.

Ninety-six, right.

So nine years.

Our first medical screenings were done September of '98. The year of '97, we did a lot of focus group meetings, like with the operators and the miners, the pipe fitters and the wire men. We had a lot of focus group meetings. We did a lot of outbound work, going out to the test site, talking to different areas and sections of people that had worked out there or that were *still* working out there for Bechtel.

It's possible that somebody can come in for a screening and maybe not have signs of anything—

Oh yes, there's a lot of them.

But a couple of years later will develop things?

Well, see, this is what the thing is. When we started the program, it was that in three years we would call everybody back to be prescreened. Now, being that this April is supposed to be our last screening, I've got paperwork in there right now, and this is what really hurts, and Lew is, you know, Dr. Pepper —everybody's first name—Lew is up against a fence, too, because we don't know what to do. We've got over three hundred people that need to be rescreened, that have contacted us, and we're just having them on hold. Basically we're telling them they're not going to be seen again.

So basically they're in the middle of this program and it's just going to end.

Yes. It's just going to end. Completely.

So that's it.

That's it.

And there's no other place for them to go with this?

No. No. They're supposed to do some kind of a national program [but] not everything has been set up on that. I don't know anything about it yet. So right now, the screening that we have in April for four days is just new people, and more than half of them already filled for that screening. But I get calls *daily, daily, daily*, and we're getting forms in daily from rescreeners. By the rescreeners, I'm talking about people that we tested three years ago and told them that they would be called back in three years to be retested. But now we can't—we don't know where to turn to. This is why it's so disheartening. There was a letter that was written by Boston University. I have given it out to the business managers. As far as I know of, only one has followed through. Tommy White, the business manager from the Laborers' Union, December 4th (the date of my birthday) mailed this letter out to forty-five hundred members of the Laborers' Union, telling them about our program coming to an end and if they would please call our Nevada congressmen and senators—we listed all six of them with their local numbers and their Washington, D.C. phone numbers—to call them to please continue our program. And that's basically what I'm trying to do now.

Are you directly working with any congress people right now?

Senator Harry Reid has been very supportive. Right now he's in a higher position in Washington, so I don't hear much from him. Shelley Berkley, we have talked to her. Now that Dr. Pepper was here for a screening, he did go and speak to Senator Harry Reid, and he also went to John Ensign's office. From what I'm gathering, I attend the [REECo] retirees' breakfast every month,

some of the guys were telling me that when they were making the phone calls, they were telling them at the offices that they [have been] getting a lot of phone calls. So I plan on going to the breakfast again in February to hand out the letter again and tell the guys to keep on hounding them. We need the political support in order to keep this going.

Right. Absolutely.

You bet. Like I said, right now it's very disheartening and very sad. It's even sadder when you attend—like I went to this funeral last week. What's going to happen? Not everybody is sick, granted, but I figure they still have—the government has enough money to keep this program funded. There is enough money to keep this program funded.

Why do you think they're so hesitant to do that?

[00:15:00] I really don't know. I don't know. The bureaucracy and the politics from Washington. And DOE.

Sure. Some folks that I've talked to that have, I guess, worked, I don't want to say more on the scientific end but are on the health physics side of things and the environmental side of things—

Which my colleagues are on.

You know, a couple have said, `We've done these tests and according to our data, it's physically impossible for some of these things to have resulted from either testing or from work-related`*— Do you come up against some of that?*

No, I'm not in that part of the field of it. I just see what *our* program is doing and I figure if the doctors are very much in favor to continue the program, they must know more medically than what I am told. My part is the notification. The outreach. That's what comes out of this office. I set up all the screenings, I schedule everybody, but mine is more outreach and notification, where the doctors just come in, do the screenings, and take over from there. After a participant

has been through our screening, that's where I end. Everything is taken over from BU and UCSF.

Right, and then they—

But they come here for many, many questions, a lot of paperwork. There is amazingly a lot of illiteracy, a *lot* of illiteracy, *with* our test site workers in the construction crafts. So I'm here any time, morning, noon, or night.

And so you'll help them fill out the paperwork.

Oh yes. Their spouses, everything, or any of the letters to explain to them what they are—especially a lot of the guys that are going to the compensation program, it's an *astronomical* amount of paperwork.

It seems like it.

It's a *lot* of paperwork, and a lot of it is repetitious. It gets confusing to them.

You seem very committed and passionate.

I am. I really am. And this is why I don't want to see the program end. One of the guys says, `Well, you're going to be without a job, Sandie,` and I [said], `Well, that, too.` But I'm hoping that I can stay with the union, somewhere in within the union, but I want to remain here. I don't want to see it come to an end.

It seems like there's still a great need for it.

Very much.

And once it comes to an end, it's almost as if this is something that doesn't even exist.

Sure, we were only supposed to do it for five years, but why end it when it's been so successful and we're helping people? We are *helping* them. Where are they going to turn to?

Well, that's just it. There's no other outlet.

Where are they going to go? They're not going to have *anywhere* else to turn to. And then the ones that are *going* to the compensation program that we've already screened or recently screened and *are* eligible for the compensation, what's going to happen to them?

Do you feel that the compensation that's offered is adequate?

It doesn't replace a life, by any means, but I figure the ones that are still alive and have received it, they're happy in retrospect that they got it while they were still alive. Now the spouses are happy because it's not going to bring their person back, but it is something financially. And then with the children.

It sounds like—you said you'd seen over three thousand people.

Thirty-five hundred.

Thirty-five hundred people.

We've tested since September of '98.

And out of those thirty-five hundred people, what are the percentages that you turn away or are not eligible?

Oh, my goodness, very few. Very few.

Right. So almost everybody that comes through the program has been eligible—

The thing that really gets me, though, is that we have sent out probably about thirteen thousand notices. We have not had much of a response. A lot of people move. There's a lot of people deceased. There was a big list turned in to the **[00:20:00]** Department of Motor Vehicle[s]. We're waiting to get that list back now. We will send out notifications again and see what kind of a response, and I'm hoping that we get a *big* response so we can prove to DOE in Washington that there is a need to continue.

Do you think there is any hesitancy on the part of former workers to [participate]?

There is. Even some that have come in here, some I have talked to on the phone, they figure they're in good health, and then a lot of them, it's need to know. A lot of them just don't *want* to know. Even if they do have some of the symptoms, I think they're afraid, let's face it, more so the men than the women. A lot of the females that we do, they're really gung-ho. In fact, we've turned a lot of the females away because they were custodian and they didn't work in the areas where it would have pertained for the screening. But the men, let's face it, men don't like doctors. But *every* one, when they come through they say, We wouldn't have been here if it wouldn't have been for Sandie, or they'll tell the doctors, It was through her persistence and her insistence. They're happy that they did. Just getting them *in* here is the thing. And we've had them from all over the United States, as far as Hawaii, Alaska. We even had a guy come in from the *Philippines*.

And these are folks that have worked in conjunction to the testing and the test site.

At the test site. Oh yes. They would not have been able to come through the screening otherwise.

Just curious, what is your ratio of male to female?

We're getting more females right now because of us picking up Losee Road, the office staff, so we are getting a lot more females. But there weren't many females that worked in the underground. They were all in the offices, secretarial, *in* the offices. That would be like *my* going through the screening. I mean I worked in Area 12, I was right there, pre-and-post-shot events, but I didn't do the actual construction work.

Do you think there's any risk to folks like you who have worked in the office or somebody that was maybe custodial staff?

Well, custodians do. Yes, if they worked in the offices out there, pre-and-post-shot, they would be eligible. I'm talking about the custodians like in Mercury base camp, the ones that clean just the housing trailers and stuff like that.

Do you think, though, that there's any possibility that there [was] any exposure?

Well, that is something that I've talked to Lew about. If it means us getting more participants, why don't we go back in the database or, I'd do more research and pick all these people out that *were* culinary, because it was Culinary Union 226. They're in the database. We can get all those people in. That would give us more numbers. But we're waiting to see what's going to happen with this DMV list. There were thirteen thousand names turned over to them.

That's a lot.

Yes. Even if it's more than half and we get a big response, like I stated, right now I'm already more than half full for April. If we get a big response, what's going to happen? `Am I going to be like those other three hundred people that are sitting here?` We have to tell them you can't—

Right. That's it.

That's it. Well, `Why did you send us these notices if I can't come in?` Maybe with *them* putting pressure to Washington.

Right. Do you find that participants are involved, particularly if you ask them to be?

Oh yes. The guys at the breakfast, I know, have followed through. And this is why I need to get that out to more people, to let them know. And we need more media support. But it's really hard with our newspapers.

Have you gone to the media with this?

Yes. Boston University has already contacted Mary Manning from the *Las Vegas Sun* and Keith Rogers from the *[Las Vegas] Review-Journal*.

I'm not familiar, has there been much media publicity?

There was at the very beginning, but lately it's gone down. And now is when we need it more than any time. Word of mouth, a lot of it basically is going out.

It seems to me that the test site is such an enormous part of Nevada history, and sometimes now the folks that worked out at the test site [are] called the Cold Warriors, are not a well acknowledged part of our history or our military **[00:25:00]** *history. Do you think that that has any effect on the DOE's ability to fund or not fund the program?*

I think DOE is aware of what went on there because DOE ran the test site, more or less, with the Pentagon. As far as we were concerned in Area 12, a lot of it was out of the Pentagon because of the Department of Defense. But most areas were DOE. I'm sure they were aware of what did go on. And this is why I can't understand when they started these programs back in '96—now all of a sudden just to stop them.

Right, and why it would just be a temporary thing, as well.

Well, it's going to be a temporary thing. We knew it was only going to be for five years, and since then it's been a year-to-year. But now when we proved to DOE that we *do* have a lot of people, *our* project has been very successful. We *have* so many more people to see.

Has that at all changed with administration change, the presidential change?

It does. Well, basically President [George W.] Bush he was with us four years ago, and now we got four more years. Yes, it has. I noticed a big change from [Bill] Clinton to Bush. But President Bush has kept it going.

Do you think that they will reactivate the test site? There's been some talk about that.

There's word that they're wanting to. Yes, there's been a lot of talk about starting back up. In fact, last night I had dinner with some friends and they informed me about a guy that had been retired from out there for five years and he went back to the test site. I guess the money they offered him was overwhelming, something he could not refuse. He's been in retirement for five years and he went back.

Interesting. So it's possible.

Yes. I know of many of the girls, administrative, that they have called back. They were working in other jobs here in Vegas but they dropped those jobs to go back out there. So I can see where they're probably going to start—I don't know if there'll ever be underground testing because we are not in a Cold War, but everything changes. We *are* at war now with Iraq but I don't know if this is going to have anything to do with the actual underground testing.

Right. Who knows what it's all linked to? So [for] twenty-five years .you were involved in a fairly busy and important time in the test site's history.

Oh yes. All underground testing.

What was it like when the moratorium [end of testing in 1992]—?

When the Cold War—? Oh, that was horrendous. We had so many layoffs. When I left in '95 I was the only girl left in our department. That was it. Everybody else had been put in other positions or they were terminated.

So it must have really changed in, what was it, 1992?

Yes. Tremendous. Right after Hunters Trophy. September of '92.The layoffs were unbelievable. Then when we knew that REECo had lost the contract and Bechtel Nevada had taken over everybody was [saying], `Well, am I going to get picked up? Am I not?` I was notified the first of December that I was not being picked up. But then I was called back in April. And I

did go back because I needed a job. I did it. I did it for six months. Ten dollars an hour but I did it. Kept my mortgage.

That's important. The important thing. Having a top clearance, are there things that you cannot talk about?

Oh yes. Yes. There's a lot that went on that we're not allowed to [discuss]. When we left the test site, you signed a form. I think they did that with everybody that had their Q-clearances.

Right. What's that like? Is that a strange thing to have secrecy like that?

Well, in retrospect, that was my job. Like this job that I have here now, there's a lot that I do not reveal.

For this job.

[00:30:00] Oh yes. Because of confidentiality. I think that would go with any job you had. There's a lot of confidentiality that one is not able to discuss. So I really have basically adhered to that.

Yes. I think it's an interesting aspect of the job.

Yes, they did that for everybody. And come to find out, which I didn't know at the time, when the guys did their exit interviews, a lot of the crafts were involved in it, too.

It's interesting. You are all out at the test site. Everybody is out there doing their job, and at one point there are [about] ten thousand people. And correct me if I'm wrong, but it almost seems like everybody's fairly self-contained. Hundreds of people may be doing the same thing, but you may not even be aware that there are more than ten people involved in what you're doing. Or am I off base on that?

What do you mean, more than ten people?

Well, I don't know if ten people is the right—it just seems like there's a lot going on and you may not know at all what's going on a hundred feet away from you—

Well, there were different areas—oh yes, there was lots of areas. Different areas did different things. There were drill holes. There were the shafts. Now Area 12 is strictly all tunnels. Tunnels only. Underground testing. There were *no* tunnels anywhere *but* Area 12. So the rest of the test site was either down holes or drill holes. OK? So basically, everybody knew Area 12 is the tunnels.

What did your family think about you working out there? Did they have any thoughts?

Well, my mommy and daddy really hated for me to be so far away from home, but I'm only two hours away by plane. And I do try to get home as much as possible. What was, I think, the hardest for me is when my family all left from here; my aunts and my uncles left the test site. But more than anything is when my grandmother and my grandfather moved back, because I was very close to them. Like I said, the test site people are my—I have some very, very dear friends and I think they have been the ones that have pulled me through everything.

Yes. It sounds like not only was it very tight back then but you're still very much in touch with people.

Yes, we still are. You spend fourteen, sixteen hours with these guys—and I say guys more than the females because there weren't too many females till later years. But you ride the bus with them, you're with them more.

What was that like, being so young and being one of the very few females out there?

They were very protective. I felt very secure, and then once I got to know the guys, got to know their wives, know their children, we were like one family, *especially* the ones from Area 12. I

don't know if they were that tight knit in the other areas because I'm not too familiar with a lot of it, but I know in Area 12 we were a *very* tight knit group. And still are.

Did you ever experience or feel like you were experiencing any sort of discrimination?

Never. No. And I've always believed, I've never judged a person by race, color, or creed. I figured my philosophy is that we're all God's children. You don't rate a person or look at a person by their color of skin.

And even as a young woman, you felt—

Yes. I was never—I don't have a prejudiced bone. Never. I was not raised that way either. I mean I went to an all-girls school, I went to Catholic schools twelve years of my life, but I didn't judge people by that.

Right. And you felt very equally at home and on the same footing as most of the men?

Yes. Yes. Always did. Like I said, they were very, very protective. Other than myself, I think there was two girls there in the late eighties and nineties that rode the bus. I mean these guys were [saying], `Oh, where's Sandie?,` if I didn't get on the bus. Being **[00:35:00]** that we had to go out there so early and I rode the same bus and with the same guys, we all had like our own seats, and they were very protective. Once you get to know them, you got to know their wives, it was nice. And it still is, in retrospect. This is why it's so hard to see them sick. It's very, very hard. Then the funerals and the children. You get very closely attached. And I guess I did because I didn't have family here.

I'm just curious because you talk about riding the bus every day. I've talked to a variety of folks who have worked out there and—

And I loved it. It never bothered me. I'm a type of a person that does not sleep. I sleep only two to four hours a night. I'd never go to bed before midnight. I was up at three o'clock in the morning.

Wow, what's your secret?

Since I went to college. I moved in the sorority house and I was up on the third floor in the sorority house. That's where my *whole* clock changed. It was so noisy, so I would study—I mean I would sleep when the girls were studying and I'd get up at midnight. I would get up at midnight and I'd stay studying, and then go to my classes. I always had early-bird classes. So my whole clock changed.

And it's been like that ever since?

It's been that way ever since. Even now I only sleep two to four hours. The *max*, four hours. I'm fine with two hours. I can go two, three days without any sleep. I'm the type person that if I'm *really* tired, I can put my head down on my desk for fifteen minutes and I can go for another day or two.

The power nap.

Yes. And on the bus, I *very, very* rarely slept. In fact, the guys got used to it after a while because I would *read* coming home. Going out I would try to keep the light off if the guys were sleeping, but I loved to read the paper. To me, it was like a down time. I love to read. Then of course in the nineties when we had the nice fashionable buses, we were able to watch movies.

Nice.

Yes. A lot of the guys would bring their videos. If it was a long movie, we'd watch part of it going out in the morning and the other part coming in. And the guys that didn't want to see the movie, they used to put the earplugs in. So it made it nice.

Do you remember going in and out any of the protests that used to go on?

Oh yes, seen a lot of them.

What was that like? What were your perceptions?

I was just glad I was in the bus and not in my car, to have rocks thrown or flat tires. Now that I am union, I would not cross a picket line, but at that time I had to because I was non-union. That was very hard, to know that these guys, what was it, mid-eighties, a lot of the guys lost their homes because it was the *worst* strike we ever had out there, the crafts strikes. But the protests, I mean—are you talking about the Greenpeace and that type?

Yeah, those guys—

Those people, well, we still went through, but that was not like a strike, I thought you were talking about the strike.

Actually I'd like to talk about the strikes, too.

The strike was very hard. *Now* I see where it was very hard. At that time I knew of a lot of people that lost their homes, divorces, families, you know, because no money. It was hard.

How long did they strike for?

Sometimes they would go for two, three months at a time. A *very* long time, depending. But the protests, I mean we'd see them on the bus and that was it.

And just drive on through.

Just drive on through.

What were your thoughts about that?

That was their prerogative. They had freedom of speech. We're a free country. They are entitled to do—I think sometimes it got a little bit out of hand, especially when they would lay down in

front of the buses and we were held back. I know of one time they wouldn't even let us in. you They turned all the buses back because they had—

So many people.

So many people, and it got very uncontrollable. They figured we were going to be there sitting for a long time, they just would turn us back. I only remember that one time.

I think the eighties was the heyday of those large protests.

[00:40:00] Right. But I figured, freedom of speech, they had *every* right to do it. Just like for the inauguration last week. In retrospect I'm glad they kept it away from where the main [part of] Pennsylvania Avenue was. I know that a lot of people were upset about that. They still had their right to be protesting but it was not in where it was going to interfere with our president's inauguration.

Right. Free speech. It seems like a lot of folks were out there protesting for some of the same reasons of things that you're doing right now.

Yes. Exactly. There is a lot of protest in reference to what we're doing right now, too. But to me, I figure we're helping these people. Helping them. Helping them. And I just wish Washington and DOE would recognize that.

Do you ever get any flak from former test site workers that don't believe in what you're doing or think that it's not necessary?

Oh yes. There [are] some that have called and said it's just a bunch of hogwash, it's all politics. They are very much against it. And I figured, with that type of an attitude, it's best they don't even have anything to do with the program. I say, `You have every right.` Like I said, freedom of speech. They have *every* right to speak what they want. I feel differently about it. Not everybody's alike.

Sure. And you are so involved.

So I'm very *much* in favor of what I'm doing, of what our project is doing—Boston and myself and California, UCSF.

Do you think there's any—and I'm assuming that you guys have tried to,through Boston and UCSF—any funding from outside of the DOE to sustain the program or to prolong it?

I don't know if Lew has tried to do that. That's what he's dealing with over at Boston. If he has, he's not informed me of it. I know when he was here, he met with somebody from UNLV [University of Nevada, Las Vegas] too. I don't know who he went and talked to from UNLV.

For this particular project or for funding?

For our project.

Possibly somebody that's working on the test site oral history project, or was it somebody for funding?

I could not tell you. I'm wanting to say maybe it was for the funding, or because of the oral history. I know Lew has been contacted over it. So maybe it was, in retrospect, with that, too.

Is there anything that we haven't talked about that you feel is important to talk about, or a part of the project or part of your history out at the test site, or just your personal history?

No, basically I think I told you everything I've done. I was born and raised in New Mexico, went to college, came out here, got hired on at the test site, stayed twenty-five years, and still here.

You like it out here.

I do. I love Las Vegas. I've seen the big change, but I like Las Vegas. I came from a small town, so it's a big difference. Even when I go home and everything shuts down, seven, eight o'clock. I'm used to the twenty-four-hour, when you can go to the store, you can go anywhere you want. But one has to be careful, especially when you're by yourself. It's not like it used to be years ago

where you felt safe. Even here in this office, when you have to be behind locked doors at all times.

Yes, I noticed that.

Yes. They've had some problems here in our vicinity and I have some friends in the police force and they basically said, `Keep your door locked at all times, Sandie.` So I am doing that.

It's too bad but a good idea. When you were employed at the test site, roughly how many folks were employed during that time frame, do you know?

Well, it varied. It *really*, really varied. In the mid-eighties is when we had the most in *our* area. But I think in the mid-eighties, there was close to about eight thousand people.

So a major employer for Las Vegas area, too, the test site was.

Oh yes. I mean where would it have been? Sure they had the casinos and **[00:45:00]** everything, but everybody was at the test site.

Do you feel that the test site had a major impact on the development of Las Vegas, of it growing into the city that it is now?

I don't. No. I think right now all Las Vegas thinks about is casinos and gambling.

I mean in its early—maybe through the seventies and the eighties.

Oh yes, the test site was a big part of it, but not now.

No, now it definitely seems to have changed.

Yes. All they worry about is casinos and the gambling. And I think—[I have lived here] thirty-four years, and I am honest about this, if I have gambled twenty dollars, it's a lot. They don't take no money from me. I'm not going to make the casinos rich.

Yes. I think if you live here, you either have to know how to make a living of it or you have to stay away.

I have so many friends, I mean religiously, Friday night, boy, they *pshoom!* And they still do it. That's what they live for and that's what they work for, fine, but that's not me.

Sure. Well I certainly appreciate you taking the time [to talk to me]. I know every time I've talked to you, you've been so busy.

Yes, because it was screening times. Right now we're in a little lull because our next screening isn't till the end of April.

So you do that twice a year?

No, we were doing them four times a year: March, June, September, and December. Four times a year. Up until now. We only have our April. And I hope there's more.

[00:47:08] End Track 4, Disc 1.

[End of interview]