NASA HEADQUARTERS ADMINISTRATOR PROJECT
ORAL HISTORY TRANSCRIPT

JOSIE A. SOPER
INTERVIEWED BY REBECCA WRIGHT
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WRIGHT: Today is April 19th, 2006. This oral history with Josie Soper is being conducted in her home in Upper Marlboro, Maryland, for the NASA Headquarters Administrator Project. The interviewer is Rebecca Wright.

Thank you again for letting me come into your home this morning and conduct this interview. I would like to begin by talking with you about how you began to work at NASA in 1962.

SOPER: Okay. Well, 1962 was a big year for NASA. In February they had the first orbital flight. John [H.] Glenn's Mercury flight was the first orbital one. Going to school in the metropolitan Washington [D.C.] area, very, very close to the Capitol, we went to see his parade. You know, it was just a big deal; it really was.

I was in my senior year of high school, taking a business course. They [NASA] actually sent recruiters to the local schools. They don't have the luxury of doing that anymore, I'm sure, but they sent a recruiter to the local high schools, and one of my brothers had said, "You ought to think about NASA. It's new. It's exciting. You ought to start thinking about where you want to go to work when you get out of school."

So that kind of sparked my interest, and when they came to the school, that made it even more interesting. So in June after I graduated, they hired me, and I went immediately to work after just about a week's vacation. The first office I was in was in the Dolly Madison House,

which was wonderful. When you're young, you don't have as much of an appreciation for the sense of history. I thought, "Oh, my god, this place is old and decrepit." [Laughs] It had an elevator that held about three people and took you upstairs to where the office was. I thought, "I don't even know what the Inventions and Contributions Board is," but I figured I'll learn.

I was very lucky, because they had a very small staff, but they hired three young people right out of school. Two of us were permanent and one was just for the summer, because she was going to start college in the fall at [College of] William and Mary. So I had the best of both worlds. I had all of these older, more seasoned, experienced people to work with, but I also had contemporaries, which was really nice.

What did we do? We sat there all day long and we typed. That's all we did. Once a month the Inventions and Contributions Board would convene a board meeting, and that was the most exciting thing that happened in that office. You know, everybody got all spun up and prepared for the board members to come down and have a meeting, and what they did was they reviewed all the applications for patent waivers.

It was in that job at that point that I first became acquainted with the name of Dr. Maxime A. Faget, because his name was on virtually every document I had to type. I mean, I don't think there was anything that he didn't have a hand in. I thought, "Okay, someday maybe I'll find out who this person is, because he's obviously somebody very important." [Laughs] I'll get on to that as to when I finally got to meet Dr. Faget. But it was very, very interesting to be fresh out of school and working in a place where there was so much history already, even in an agency that was so young.

The other thing that I found exciting that happened to me during that time, because I only worked in that office for three years, was—NASA was small and it was very spread out. It

didn't have a Headquarters Building. It had locations all around the city, and there was a shuttle bus that went from place to place to place. They had three floors in Federal Building 6, which still exists—it's across the street from the Air and Space Museum—and they shared it with the Department of Education. NASA had the top three floors. Education had the rest of the building. The top brass were in that building. All the rest of the worker bees were all over the place.

There were a few offices in the Dolly Madison House, where I was, which was called A Building. Then two doors down there were offices in what they called T Building, and in that building, just to show you how different things are, that was where you had to go to make a copy of something. You had to go down this rickety elevator, out onto the street, two doors down to T Building to use the copier. We didn't even have a copy machine in our office.

We had electric typewriters. Everything you did had what they called rainbow copies, so if you made a mistake, you had to erase five carbon copies. We just sat there, and we typed briefing memorandums to the Deputy Administrator, who was Hugh [L.] Dryden. After you got all these packages typed, and they were reviewed by the Administrative Assistant in the office, and they were ready to go forward, you had to take them from building to building to get concurrence on these packages.

Then the last stop was the Deputy Administrator's office on the seventh floor of FOB-6. And you're pretty intimidated when you're just a kid and you don't know anybody, and you have to hand carry this package up to the Deputy Administrator's secretary, who was like a very senior woman, very imposing figure. She would scare you to death. [Laughs] It's not like that now.

But anyway, Dr. Dryden was the first person that—we actually reported directly to the Deputy Administrator. The head of the Inventions and Contributions Board at that time was a man by the name of James [A.] Hootman, and we were directly under the Deputy Administrator. So it was a really good place to start, because it was associated with senior management. That's one thing that I've been very fortunate. I've never worked in the depths of the organization. I've always worked at a level where you dealt with senior management, even my first job. Not that I had any interface with Dr. Dryden, but I was typing things that he was going to sign that became official documents, that the agency negotiated and went forward with. So I was pretty scared.

We had this woman that was the Office Manager, and she was enough to scare anybody. I mean, you know, she had the three of us in the palm of her hand, these girls right out of school. Boy, you didn't do anything that Betty didn't say was okay. She was tough. She didn't cut you any slack. But that's a good way to learn. I'm sorry to say if a lot of the people that were coming into the workforce today had that kind of pressure on them, they'd be better employees for it; they really would.

But anyway, I stayed there for almost a full three years, because it was the summer of 1965 that I decided, "Gee, I need to go do something else. I've typed enough patent waiver applications, briefing memos to Dr. Dryden. I need to learn a little bit more about what's going on," and there wasn't any real room for advancement in that office.

Oh, but one of the things that did happen while I was there that made a very strong impression on me was I was out on the street at lunch. You had to go out and find someplace to eat, because there weren't any cafeterias or anything like that. You didn't have all the amenities that they provide to workers today, like the luxury of a refrigerator in your office, so you had to go out every day and get yourself something to eat. I was coming back from lunch on my way

into the building, which was at 1520 H Street, right across the street from Lafayette Park. All of a sudden there was a flurry of activity on the street, and there were people with newspapers and people running up and down, because they had just gotten the word that President [John F.] Kennedy had been shot. That was a pretty strong experience, to be right there half a block from the White House and see the reaction of the public to that news.

WRIGHT: Did you have the thought at that time how it would affect the space agency?

SOPER: No. I was too young. I had no idea. But I found out very quickly, because after I left that job—and honest to God, I can't remember how I found out about the next opportunity, whether someone in the Personnel Office, whether they had vacancy announcements. The whole process was so different in the sixties than it is today. There wasn't the Internet. There wasn't all of this stuff available to you electronically. I don't know whether I saw an announcement or someone told me about it, but there was a vacancy posted as Secretary to the News Chief in the Office of Public Information.

I applied for it, and I got it. It was a promotion. They were very unhappy to see me leave, the Inventions and Contributions Board, but I said, "Hey, I got to go do something else."

So that job took me to FOB-6, which is where the Public Affairs Office was located at the time. There I was in the newsroom, and it was called a "bull pen." I didn't have that much experience. I certainly didn't know how to be a secretary, so I had to learn.

That was when things really started taking off in a totally different direction for me, because I started working with people who were interesting, and dealing with the media was like, oh, my god, you know. I mean, we actually had reporters come in with their portable typewriters

and sit in this newsroom and type their stories. We had AP [Associated Press] and UPI [United Press International] wire tapes that were [imitates noise] making all that noise over—we had a little plastic wall around them, but you could—I mean, and I thought, "Oh, wow, I'm really at the heart of all this activity." It was exciting. It was really, really exciting. I wasn't doing anything all that challenging. I was typing. I was typing press releases and getting to know people. I thought, "Wow."

Then things started happening in the agency; I mean significant things started happening in the agency. Let's see, I started there in '65, and I had various and sundry jobs in the Office of Public Affairs—Public Information, Public Affairs—up until I left there, which was 1972. I worked for the News Chief. Then I was Secretary to the Deputy Director. Then I was ultimately Secretary to the Director. You know, opportunities opened up.

Most of the people that worked in the newsroom at that time had a press background of some sort. They were either writer-editors, or they had come to work for the government from the news media job, because everybody wanted to come to NASA at that time because NASA was doing so many interesting things, new and exciting and challenging things. We went from Mercury into Gemini.

[From] The time that I was in Public Affairs, I worked, in some way shape or form, on every human space flight program from Mercury to Gemini to Apollo to Skylab to Shuttle and Station. I mean, that's—I just seemed to be in the places where the kind of job I was doing dealt with the manned space program, Manned Space Flight Program. I didn't have a whole lot of knowledge in those days about other things the agency was doing, like space science and aeronautics. I mean, I knew just marginally. The focus of what I was doing was manned space flight.

We were in the newsroom. We had to issue, for every mission, paper accreditations to the news media. They had to be bona fide members of the press in order to cover a mission, and they had to present that. They had to prove that they were bona fide members of the news media. We had to issue them an identification, a press credential, so that they could cover the events of those early flights. We did that, of course, manually. I mean, I did a lot of typing in those days, a lot of typing, just because it was before the personal computer really took off. [Laughs]

It was funny, because I was amazed at some of the folks that worked in the newsroom. Those guys that were obviously reporters, and boy, they could sit there with a manual typewriter and two fingers, and they could type—run circles around —because that's what they'd been doing all their life. It was fascinating. It was just absolutely fascinating.

One of the big things I learned how to do while I was working in that kind of an environment was how to edit and how to proofread, and it served me well to this day. My daughter-in-law, who is working on her Ph.D. and does a lot of presentations, she'll ask me to proofread them and ask me to just look at them, because the only way that we could—you didn't have computers, so you didn't have a spell-check. I mean, you sat there with one of your co-workers, and you did back-and-forth proofreading, not only for context but for spelling errors and grammatical errors and that sort of thing.

It's amazing how, when you're that age, and you think, "Oh, god, this is so boring." You don't realize how much you're learning until someday all of a sudden you have that skill and nobody else does. They say, "How did you learn to do that?" Well, I learned to do it because it was my job. I had to learn to do it.

It was while I was working in the Office of Public Information that I got married and immediately started a family. But I knew I had to continue working, and my job was just—it just was a big part of my life, even at that point, even when I had a youngster to take care of. The job was always so fascinating and so demanding, and I was very fortunate in that my husband understood that. He never asked me to put anything but my job first, and I did, I mean, to a certain degree. I was lucky I was a Washington [D.C.] native, so I had family close by, so I had people that I could rely on to help me.

WRIGHT: A good support group.

SOPER: Yes, I did. I had a very good support group. When my son was born, I was back to work in six weeks to the day that he was born. I mean, the luxury that women have today of taking off months at a time when they start their family.

WRIGHT: And they held your job for you while you were gone?

SOPER: Oh yes.

WRIGHT: Without a problem?

SOPER: No problem at all. Are you kidding? They couldn't wait till I got back. [Laughter] I worked up until the day before he was born. I got up one Thursday morning to go to work, and my water broke. Spent the day in the hospital, and he was born that night. And I was back at

work six weeks after he was born, and that was the longest break in service I had was those six weeks. In fact, when I had—I had to have back surgery two years ago, right about this time; it was in early March of 2004. I was out of work seven weeks, and that was longer than when I was out to have a baby. That was so strange. It was really, really odd.

So to talk about significant memories or experiences during these periods, -- As I said, once I went to work for Public Affairs, things really started happening in the agency. I had the opportunity to start traveling, because they would send help from Headquarters down to Kennedy [Space Center, Cape Canaveral, Florida] [KSC] to work with the media to get them badged and accredited so they could go out to the press site and cover the missions. The very first mission that I got to go down and work at the Cape was Apollo 10, and that was while I was still working in Public Affairs, so that was a significant period for me.

Like I said, I learned editing and proofreading skills from those years that I worked in the newsroom. That was the most important thing that I had to do. We didn't put out press kits that were replete with errors. So that was a significant thing.

Then the other significant thing that happened while I was working there was the Apollo 204 fire. I was working for the News Chief at that time. It was a Friday night. The News Chief was Bill [William J.] O'Donnell. I lived very close to where I worked. I lived in D.C.; lived with my parents. I went home from work on a Friday night. I was eating dinner. The phone rang about maybe six-thirty, seven o'clock, and it was my boss. It was Mr. O'Donnell, and he said, "Is there any chance you can come back into the office? We're going to need some help in here. There's been an accident." That's all he told me.

So I told my father I needed to go back to work, and he said, "What do you mean? It's seven o'clock on a Friday night. What do you mean you need to go back to work?"

I said, "I don't know what—." I said, "I'll get a ca—."

He said, "I don't want you out there in the dark by yourself."

I said, "I have to go." I said, "My boss asked me to come in." So I caught a taxi and I went into the newsroom.

When I got in there, I found out what was going on, and we worked—I don't know—on into the night. Came back in on Saturday. Came back in on Sunday. Because again, without the benefit of computers and the Internet, everything was done by phone.

We had in the newsroom at that time what they called a Sudden Notice List, and that was a list of all the reporters that covered for specific publications. Every time something major happened, you called them and you read them the press release over the telephone. We were making calls constantly, because every time there would be an update on what happened, we would have to call people. There were people at KSC, at Kennedy, that were closer to the activities, but there were people in Washington that didn't—I mean, this was 1967. Things were just very, very different.

So the reporters came, and they camped out in the newsroom so that they could get the stories and file the stories in a timely fashion.

WRIGHT: What state was the newsroom in when you walked in? Had they already started telling people or was it—

SOPER: Yes. There were already a whole boatload of people in there, including my boss, Bill O'Donnell, when I came in. He called as many of the staff as he could collect on a Friday night after work. I forget what time the fire was, but it was early evening by the time the news reached

Headquarters. They had set up some—now I'm getting ahead of myself; that was in the NASA Auditorium during Apollo 13, not during the 204 fire. All I can remember about the 204 fire was I spent the whole weekend working in the office, and we were typing releases and sending out things on the fax, you know, that kind of stuff.

The other thing that really made an impact on me, because I had worked so closely on this, as all of us in Public Affairs had, two of the three astronauts that died in that accident were military. Ed [Edward H.] White [II], I think, was the only one that was a civilian. Or was it just the other way around? Was it Roger [B.] Chaffee? In any event, "Gus" [Virgil I.] Grissom and the other former military astronaut were buried at Arlington National Cemetery.

In conjunction with Public Information, there was the other side of Public Affairs, which handled more of the external things. I forget what it was called in those days; we called it the Astronaut Office. We had a subsidiary of the Houston Astronaut Office at Headquarters. Public Affairs had two or three different elements. It had Public Information. It had Special Events. It had different divisions.

Well, the division that had anything to do with astronauts, of course, was pulling in everybody to help. You needed as much help as you could get, because once they found out that two of them were going to be buried here in Washington, there was a good deal of activity that needed to be done. They had to bring families here. Arrangements had to be made with Arlington. So I worked on that, along with many other people in Public Affairs, acting as host to the families. They put them all up at the Georgetown Inn on Wisconsin Avenue in Georgetown, which was a strange place to put them, because it was so congested. I remember being up there, working behind the scenes, helping to get the families settled.

Then it came time for the funeral, and we got to go to the funeral, because we had been working on it. That was the first military funeral I'd ever been to, and it was just amazing. It was snowing. It was cold. It was January. It was bleak. It was all the awful things that you associate with that kind of an event in your life. I'd never seen a military funeral and didn't know about the caisson and taps. It had a tremendous emotional impact on me. It really did. So that's something I remember very clearly from that period of my association with NASA.

During the time I worked in Public Affairs, we also had the Apollo 13 accident—incident; it wasn't an accident. I'll call it an incident. That was another thing I got summoned back into the building for, because they knew the astronauts were in trouble. I came into the building after hours, and on my way down to the newsroom—and the newsroom was on the sixth floor of FOB-6, which was down the hall from the auditorium—I walked past the auditorium on my way into the newsroom, and I looked in, and there was the Administrator and all kinds of senior management, watching some kind of a—they called it a PAO loop, which was a direct line to mission control.

Depending upon who you worked for and where you worked, certain offices had the squawk boxes that were part of the PAO loop. But they had a big—you know, as sophisticated as it could be in 1970—setup in the auditorium with a direct link to mission control in Houston so that senior management in Washington could be plugged into what was going on.

That was another important milestone for me, because I thought, "My god, I can't believe I'm here while all this is going on." When the movie came out, when the movie was released, it brought back a lot of memories of my being in NASA Headquarters Public Affairs at that time.

That's one thing I've been very, very fortunate. I've always worked in areas where you were at the pulse of everything that's going on. The only office I worked in that was a distance

from the programs and the things that were happening day to day was the Inventions and Contributions Board. That was more routine. Because after a six- or seven-year stint in Public Affairs, I then went to Legislative Affairs, which was the same kind of a situation; you just had a different constituency. You weren't dealing with the press. You were dealing with the Hill.

I thought the press were hard to deal with until I got to Legislative Affairs and found out that there was a whole other set of customers that—because I used to think the press was pretty demanding. You had to be really careful. You learned to keep your mouth shut and only answer questions and only tell them what, you know—because you'd be on the telephone, and here's this inexperienced kid reading a press release, and they start asking you technical questions. "Well, I'm sorry. You're going to have to talk to one of the Public Affairs officers, because I really don't know the answer to that."

WRIGHT: While we're still in the Public Affairs area, earlier you mentioned that you'd had an opportunity to travel down to the Cape, and the first launch you went to was Apollo 10. Can you share some of those thoughts and experiences about working down there and then being able to see the launch?

SOPER: Well, Apollo 10 was really exciting, because they had some airplanes that the agency had chartered, and I got to go as a guest and not a worker bee. It was down and back in one day. It was really exciting. There were several of us from Public Affairs that had, of course, worked on the mission in advance prep for the press work. You got to go down there and see firsthand what you were working on remotely, so that was really exciting. I was very excited about that. Then having gone down there and met some of the people that were counterparts at either JSC

[Johnson Space Center, Houston, Texas] or KSC or Marshall [Space Flight Center, Huntsville, Alabama], that I knew from a telephone relationship; got to meet them personally, and that was exciting.

So when Apollo 11, Apollo 12—I'm trying to remember; I'll have to go back through my mission badges and see which missions I was down there for. It's so long ago, I can't even remember, and I went to so many. So Apollo 11, of course, they needed as much help as they could possibly get, so I got to work in the newsroom. We were accrediting news media, issuing press badges. Then when it came time to go out to the site, the press site was on the side of the Vehicle Assembly Building, and it was approximately three miles from the pad. It was just so exciting. I mean, you know, I don't know how else to describe it.

There is no experience like seeing a launch live. They've simulated it beautifully, especially with the advent of the IMAX camera and the footage and all those wonderful IMAX films that the Air and Space Museum has. I mean, that's about as close to a living experience as anybody's going to get. Many people still have interest in going. They go down there; sometimes we don't launch.

But there will never be an experience to take the place of an Apollo Saturn V liftoff. You'd be standing in the bleachers, and it would be—I hate Florida. I hate hot weather, okay? But I would put up with anything when I was down there, because it was just being there and witnessing that. You see that rocket take off, and there's this delayed reaction, and by the time it gets to where you're standing, the rumble is about two or three minutes after. You feel this little bit of a quiver, and you get that sound, that it takes that long to travel to where you are.

It's just an experience that you can't really explain to somebody. I still get goose bumps when I see—and the Shuttle is nothing compared to those Saturn V rockets. I mean, when those

things lit, it was like, "Oh, my god. This is amazing." To this day I can't watch a liftoff that I don't get goose bumps. Because I've been in jobs where I've been very, very fortunate, I've seen more of them than the average person. Not as many as some people; certainly not as many as Gene [Eugene F.] Kranz, but for where I was in the organization, you know, I just worked in the right places at the right time.

WRIGHT: How was the activity, when you got back to Washington, in the press office during the Apollo 11? Were you busy the entire mission?

SOPER: I have to tell you, I don't remember. I'm sure we were, but I can't remember specifically. That newsroom was always busy. Phones were ringing all the time, and typewriters were going. You ate at your desk, and the only time you left your desk was when you went to the copy machine or you went to the ladies' room. But it was amazing. It was an amazing place to work.

WRIGHT: Living in history as it's being made.

SOPER: Yes. I mean, it really was, and I loved it. I absolutely loved it. I was useless when I came home. I was always exhausted, because then I started getting into jobs where I was working for the senior-level people, and they weren't eight to four-thirty jobs. You stayed as long as your boss needed you, and I worked a lot of overtime during those years.

WRIGHT: Well, in 1972 you moved out of the Public Affairs Office.

SOPER: I went from the frying pan into the fire.

WRIGHT: Was that your option? That was a move you wanted to do?

SOPER: It was a promotion. It was an opportunity to go work for the Deputy Director of Legislative Affairs—they had two Deputies at the time—and it was an opportunity to get a promotion, so I applied and I took it. It was right down the hall from Public Affairs, and it was just the same kind of a fast-paced, frenetic environment, front-office environment. That was my first introduction to the front office, because I was working for the Deputy Director. At the time I went to work down there, Dale Grubb was the head of Legislative Affairs, and he had two Deputies. One Deputy was a Deputy for Policy, and that man's name was [Gerald J.] Jerry Mossinghoff [Assistant General Counsel for General Law].

We'll start talking about some of the people when we get into Legislative Affairs, but before I leave Public Affairs, there were several people that made a very strong impression on me. One was Julian Scheer [Assistant Administrator of NASA for Public Affairs]. I just thought he was amazing. And several of the people that I worked for in Public Affairs made lasting impressions on me. Ralph Gibson, who was a News Chief; Joe [Joseph A.] Stein, who was a News Chief; Bill O'Donnell, who is still alive and still very much involved, comes back for all the alumnae parties. Public Affairs has alumnae parties about once a year.

I just learned an awful lot from these people. They were dedicated. They shared their knowledge with you, and that's how you learned. You could ask them anything, and they would answer your question. It was just an amazing place to be.

It was hard for me to leave Public Affairs, because I was there for a long time, and I really, really liked it. But by the time I left Public Affairs, I was working for the Deputy AA [Associate Administrator], and the only other advancement was to work for the AA, and I knew I wasn't going to get that job, because I knew she wasn't going anywhere anytime soon. So I needed to move along, so when the job in Legislative Affairs became available, I thought, "I'll like this just as much," because I was well acquainted with what they did. Like I said, it was the same kind of a thing. It was an external operation. They were just dealing with a different set of customers.

While I learned a lot in Public Affairs, once I went to work in Legislative Affairs, then I really started learning more about the budget and politics and things like that that have brought me to where I am today, because I was very fortunate. I got to work with people who were mentors, and you could ask them anything, and they would stop and they would explain it to you, and they would tell you.

Jerry Mossinghoff was a lawyer by training, and he was a policy wonk. That's the only way I can describe him. I mean, this man knew everything there was to know about how to make policy, how to write it, how to implement it. I didn't work for him directly. I worked for his counterpart Deputy, who was brought into the agency; it was a man by the name of Bob Hood. He was brought into the agency from McDonnell Douglas [Aircraft Company]. So he was a contractor who came to work for the government. His plan was to be there two years, because that was part of his career path. To be effective as a NASA contractor, you had to do a stint in government. You had to see how it was from the other side.

So NASA hired him to run programs, the program side of Legislative Affairs. That trio of Grubb, Mossinghoff, and Hood were so effective and so good at what they did. I worked in

that office when it had some of the most stellar individuals. They knew how to work the agency. They knew how to work the Hill. They knew how to work industry. They worked it together as a group, and it was amazing.

It was amazing to watch. It was amazing to learn from them, to see—and I didn't realize I was learning as much as I was learning at the time, because I was still fairly young. I had a growing child. I had a life outside of the office. But all of a sudden I began to get more drawn into—my professional life started really taking up a lot of my time. I was just fortunate that I had the flexibility to do that. I consider myself fortunate.

So when I went to work in Legislative Affairs, I went to work as Bob Hood's secretary. That was '72, so we were still knee-deep into manned flight activity. We probably were—I'd have to go back and look—in Skylab probably by then. I'd have to go back and compare.

WRIGHT: Also, were you there when the legislation was signed for the Space Shuttle? That was January [1972].

SOPER: Oh yes. Oh yes, I will get to that. When I went to Legislative Affairs, I found myself doing almost the same thing I was doing in Public Affairs, only for this different constituency, because every time there was a launch, there was tremendous interest on the Hill. We were chartering airplanes, bringing members of Congress and Senate, their staff, down to the Cape for these missions. So the staff got involved. You were a hostess. You helped get these people badged, getting them on and off airplanes. So I was still traveling, going down for launches, just dealing with a different set of customers. Not the press, but the Hill, and doing a lot of the same kinds of things that I did in Public Affairs, but doing it for the legislative side.

I worked for some really, really fabulous people. After Dale Grubb left, Gerry [Gerald D.] Griffin became the head of that office, and that was during a time when there were a couple of Deputy Administrators of NASA that I thought just made such an impression on me. The first one, of course, was Dr. Dryden.

The next one was George [M.] Low. George Low was Deputy Administrator by that time, and his philosophy was you bring people into management roles that have strictly a technical background, and you give them a taste of doing both things. See, he brought in Gerry Griffin after Dale Grubb left that job, and Dale Grubb was a lobbyist. I mean, that was his job, okay? Gerry Griffin was a Flight Director, okay? So he came to Washington and had to learn how to be a lobbyist, and he learned it very well, and he did a really, really good job. Now, I didn't work directly for Gerry until he was almost ready to finish, but Dr. Low's philosophy was you start bringing people in from other parts of the organization and put them into management roles so that they bring a fresh spin, and they go back with a different spin on what they learned while they were at Headquarters.

This was the Deputy Administrator of the agency. These were people that were revered by people at my level, and he'd walk into the office unannounced with his shirtsleeves rolled up, looking like just an ordinary person. And you'd, "Oh, my god, there's Dr. Low." He'd have a green pen in his hand. Everything he marked up, he marked up in green. And I mean, when he walked into the office, it was like, "Oh, my god. Did you know Dr. Low was coming?" You know, I mean, it was a big deal. He knew Gerry, of course, from JSC, from MSC [Manned Spacecraft Center], so instead of picking up the phone, he would just walk down to the sixth floor, if he wanted to talk to Gerry Griffin.

Then Gerry was there, I guess three years, and by the time he was almost ready to leave, his secretary had left to take another job, and that opened up that job. So I was like in line for that, so I ended up working for Gerry for just a brief period of time before his tour was up, because they would rotate about three years, two to three years in those jobs. He was ready to go back to Houston, and his replacement was Joe Allen [Joseph P. Allen]. I was working as the secretary to the head of Legislative Affairs at that point in time, so Joe inherited me. I was there. He didn't get a vote. This was, you know, "This is who works for you."

Gerry told me, he said, "You'll like Joe. You'll get along with him." Because I had gotten to know Gerry pretty well, and I was really sad to see him go. I really liked him, and I really respected him, and I thought he was wonderful. And he's, "Oh, you'll like Joe. You'll enjoy working for him just as much."

I said, "Okay," you know, "whatever." And in comes Joe Allen. The first time Gerry introduced me to him, I thought to myself, "Oh, my god, I don't know if I can work for somebody that looks young enough to be my son. Oh, my god. What have I got myself into?" And I thought, "Okay, so he looks like a little kid," because he was very youthful looking.

That was my first exposure to dealing with somebody from the astronaut corps, up close and personal. The whole time he was there, he had to maintain his flight proficiency, so he was off flying T-38s, running back and forth to the Hill. But he had, again, his really good Deputies that kept everything humming like a well-oiled machine. It was when I worked for Joe Allen that I first became acquainted with the name George W. S. Abbey. It was just a name, and he was always referred to as "George W. S. Abbey."

Joe would say—and he was "Dr. Allen." Gerry was very different. Gerry wanted everybody to call him "Gerry," and we always told him, "Okay, you're Gerry when I walk into

your office and I say, 'Gerry, you need to sign that.' But you're Mr. Griffin on the telephone and everyplace else."

Joe came into the office, and the first thing he said to me was, "I want you to call me by my first name, 'Dr.'" [Laughter] I never called him Joe until he left NASA. He was "Dr. Allen" the whole time. "Just call me by my first name, 'Dr.'"

The very first time I had to type his CV [curriculum vitae], I thought I was going to die. It must have been [pause] forty pages, and I thought, "I've never met anybody this smart." He was one of the most amazing people that I had the pleasure of working for, because he was brilliant, but could bring every conversation down to the level of the person that he was having the conversation with. I always told him, "You should have been a teacher."

He said, "Well, I come from a family of teachers. My father's a teacher. My brother's a teacher."

I said, "Well, you've got a bent for it," because he could take the most complicated topic and talk to you about it if you were seven, you were twenty-seven, or you were sixty-seven, and talk to you about it on the level that he knew was appropriate for not only your age, but your educational background. Amazing man, amazing man, and I, of course, loved working for him the whole time.

We had some really, really tough things happen. The last thing that happened when Gerry was there was Apollo-Soyuz [Test Project] [ASTP], and of course, Apollo-Soyuz was the end of the Apollo Program, even though—even after Apollo 17, we knew we would have some subsequent missions that would be manned.

Then we went into that God-awful dry spell, and that was so hard, because everything that we did, we had to fight for every dollar. That's all Joe Allen did the whole time he was

there was go up on the Hill and lobby for money so that we could get funding for the Shuttle. It was a very tough time to be working for the agency, because you went from all this—what do they call it?—"Buck Rogers" stuff, okay, to this terrible period of time where you weren't doing anything. The public was losing interest. There were wars going on. The space agency wasn't what it was in the sixties. Didn't have the support. Didn't have the public enthusiasm. Didn't have the visual stuff going on. It was tough.

But while I was in Legislative Affairs, we had some major, major milestones. We had ASTP. We had Apollo 17. We had the last of the Apollo flights. We had the approach and landing tests for the Shuttle. I worked for Joe during that time, and they weren't as big as a launch, but because we weren't doing anything else, it was the only thing we had to show people, so they almost became as big as a launch. The last one, Joe said to me, he said, "I need somebody to go out to Dryden [Flight Research Center, Edwards, California] and work with Public Affairs." He said, "And I want you to go do that."

I said, "Well, I can't do that by myself."

"Oh, of course you can. You just need to take care of the congressional people. There won't be that many. You'll be working with Gene Marinetti [phonetic] and his people in Public Affairs. We just want to have a presence of somebody from our staff out there." He said, "And I'll be out there, too."

Well, it was Josie against the world, because Joe was off schmoozing and being a politician and doing whatever it was he did best, okay, and there was Josie, sitting there in this media center in Palmdale [California]. Never been to California in my life. It was August. He said, "I want you to go do this."

I said, "Okay, I'll do it, as long as somebody tells me what I need to do."

He said, "Well, Gene Marinetti will tell you what you need to do."

Get on an airplane and fly to California. Rent a car. Never been out there. Drove on the freeway from L.A. [Los Angeles] to Palmdale. My husband said to me, "You've gone down to the Cape, and you know people down there. Do you know anybody out there?"

I said, "No." I thought, "Well, he says I can do this. I guess I can."

Dave [David R.] Scott was the [Dryden FRC] Director at the time. It was so exciting. It was so cool to be out there and to do that and to do it completely alone. I thought, "Hey." And I was busy. Oh, god, I was so busy, because these people were calling, and this one was coming in with their family. Congressional staffers and congressional members were three times as hard to keep happy as the news media, because they were important, and they were full of self-importance. You took care of them like they were special.

I remember that. I remember it really, really vividly, because it was the one and only time I was ever in California. I had no idea what I would be doing. I knew some of the people I'd be working with, because I worked with them at Headquarters. But I was really, really glad I did that. It was amazing to be out there. It was a great opportunity to experience a different aspect of the program than just being at the Cape and watching a launch, because this was just completely different. It really was.

WRIGHT: Were you able to go down for the tests?

SOPER: Oh yes. We were all out there on Rogers [Dry] Lakebed at Dryden, thinking, "Okay." [Laughs]

WRIGHT: Literally a vast difference than the Cape.

SOPER: Oh yes. It was just amazing. It really was. I remember after it was all over saying to Joe, "I don't believe what you got me into. Do you know how—?" I think I must have lost about ten pounds when I was out there those two or three days, because I never stopped. I never stopped. It was nonstop. It was just me. I was the only one from the Office of Legislative Affairs, and I was used to being down at the Cape, where there were all kinds of people, all working on, you know—and it was fascinating. It really was.

While I was going out there, one of my friends in Public Affairs said to me, "You know, you should come back through Orlando. You could have Charles and Sasha [phonetic] [spouse and son] meet you in Orlando, and you could take a couple of days, and you could go to Disney World. And you won't have to pay for your flight. You'll just have to pay for them, because the government has to bring you back from California. All you'll have to do is pay for the difference between Orlando and Washington."

I said, "Really? Okay." So in addition to that tremendous unknown that was facing me—having to go out to Dryden by myself—I started planning this trip to Disney World and having my husband and son meet me in Orlando. Well, I had no idea what I was going to be doing out there, and I took a red-eye flight from L.A. to Orlando. They had gotten in the night before and came to meet me at the airport. I was exhausted. They wanted to go play, and I was just absolutely wiped out, not only from my first red-eye flight and my first jet lag, because I'd never been to the West Coast before.

That trip to Disney World was such a waste for me. We spent about two or three days there, and I was just no fun, because I was so tired from having worked as hard as I worked out

at Dryden, and then the jet lag, and then to have a husband and a seven- or eight-year-old son, however old he was at the time. I guess he was probably a little older than that. First exposure to Disney World. We spent like two days, two nights and three days or something like that and then came back. That almost killed me. [Laughs] It really did, but I'm glad I did it. You do those kinds of things when you're young. Now I would have looked and said, "In your dreams."

I mean, I used to get up in the middle of the night and go out to Andrews [Air Force Base], because we would take these one-day trips down to the Cape. I'd come home from work after working all day. Get a couple of hours' sleep. Get up in the middle of the night and drive out to Andrews. Be there all ready to work at three o'clock in the morning as we were checking people in and putting them on airplanes and being a hostess. I couldn't do that now for all the money in the world; I don't have the energy level that I had then.

WRIGHT: You used it all up back then. [Laughs]

SOPER: I used it all up. I did. I used it all up. So I worked in Legislative Affairs even after Joe left. Joe went back to Houston—it broke my heart—and in came Terry [Terrence T.] Finn. Terry Finn was just such a completely and totally different breed of cat than any of the people that I had ever worked with in Legislative Affairs. He came from the Hill. He was the Hill type. So he didn't know anything about the program. I worked for Terry for about a year, and every bit as hard as I worked when I worked for Gerry and when I worked for Joe, but different.

It was much more mentally challenging, because he was the first person I really had to train. Joe (Allen) says I trained him (Joe Allen); I really didn't. Terry knew everything there was to know about the Hill, but nothing about NASA. It was easier to teach people to learn the

Hill than it was to teach them about NASA. It seems like that was the foundation for what I've ended up doing these last many years in the Administrator's office. I get people that come in and don't know anything about the agency and have to learn the NASA culture, which is very hard.

It's not hard for me, because I've grown up with it, but it's very hard to teach somebody what that culture is like. You don't learn it overnight, because a lot of it is ingrained. NASA, until recent years, has had virtually no turnover. People come and they don't leave. They spend their whole career there. Or they leave, and then they come back, and they leave, and then they come back.

When I went to work for Bob [Robert F.] Allnutt in the Administrator's office, that was his third stint at NASA. He started out working at NASA as like a paralegal at Langley [Research Center, Hampton, Virginia] when he was still in law school, okay? Then he left and went and did other things, and then he came back to the Office of Legislative Affairs as the head of that office. Now, I didn't work in that office when he was the head of that office, but I knew who he was and what his job was. I was down the hall in Public Affairs, because after Allnutt left, that's when Grubb became head of Legislative Affairs. Then he [Allnutt] left and went to work for EPA [Environmental Protection Agency] or another government agency, and then came back as the Associate Deputy Administrator in the front office.

That's when I went to work for him, because that job opened up. The woman that was up there became ill and had to leave. He knew me, and I knew the guy that was his exec. They told me about the job, and it was, again, a promotion, so I applied for it.

WRIGHT: That must have been a compliment. They came looking for you this time.

SOPER: Yes, it was. It was. I knew Mr. Allnutt from when he ran Legislative Affairs, and I was down in Public Affairs. I mean, I didn't know him real well, but that was the way people hired back in those days, by word of mouth, and by, you know, hey, you grab somebody from here because you know they've got some background. So I went to work in the front office as his secretary. Terry had only been there a year in Legislative Affairs, and he was heartbroken that I was leaving. But I said, "I have to leave. I can't go any further here."

He said, "Well, the only way I'll let you go is knowing that you'll go work for Bob Allnutt and that you'll still be in touch," because our office reported to Allnutt in the front office. Legislative Affairs reported to the Associate Deputy Administrator.

SOPER: So I went to work in the front office as Mr. Allnutt's secretary, after like seven years in Legislative Affairs. Public Affairs and Legislative Affairs were high-pressure, fast-paced, pressure cooker type environments. I worked a lot of overtime. I worked for some really smart people, and I learned a lot. I learned how to work hard, and it was just invaluable. It was the perfect training ground to go work in the Administrator's office. That's all there was to it, you know. It was that simple.

So then I ended up in the front office, and—

WRIGHT: When you say the words *front office*, what does that all entail?

SOPER: It is the office of the Administrator, and it's just a suite, a small suite, never any bigger than twenty-five people, and it encompasses the top management of the agency, the

Administrator, the Deputy Administrator, the one, two, and three positions, and then the staff that support them. That's the front office. It's small.

When I went to work up there, there were basically—there was—let's see. Management structure ebbs and flows, you know. It's this way, and then it changes, and then it goes back to that. We're now back today to having a three-tier agency management style, Administrator, Deputy Administrator, Associate Administrator. We had that back in the sixties and seventies when Jim [James E.] Webb was there, and Bob [Robert C.] Seamans [Jr.] was the number three. It was Webb and Dryden and Seamans.

Then, you know, that changes, but people basically are called something different, but they're still really doing the same thing. Titles change, but the basic way they carve up the pie doesn't. But the Administrator's front office is a very small group of people. It's usually the top level management, one, two, and three positions, and then the one tier down, people that support them, because all the rest of the agency, the Associate Administrators, Assistant Administrators, and Center Directors, all report up to those people.

So when I went to work in the front office, I worked for the number three person, and that was Bob Allnutt, who was at that time called the Associate Deputy Administrator, a job formerly held by Willis [H.] Shapley for years. Years, Shapley had that job. It was the role at that time of that person was to be the filter for the external operations. Public Affairs, Legislative Affairs, External Affairs, all reported up to the Administrator through the Associate Deputy Administrator, through the number three person. So, all these external offices that I had worked in reported to my boss now, so it was a logical place for me to be interested in going to work.

WRIGHT: A great, suitable training ground.

SOPER: Yes, because I had worked in—the only place I hadn't worked in was international. That was the only one I had not worked in. So when I went to work for Mr. Allnutt, all of these people reported directly to him. So there I was, fat, dumb, and happy, working for Mr. Allnutt as his secretary. He had an Executive Assistant, then called a "horse holder," and it was a nice, happy little threesome.

Then things really started to change, because President [James E. "Jimmy"] Carter, when I went to work for Mr. Allnutt -- the administration changed, and that was the first time I really got to see the impact on management from a change in presidential administration, because when I went to work up there, Dr. [Robert A.] Frosch was the Administrator, and that was like August or September of 1979. So I'm there, and I'm working along, fat, dumb, and happy, and all of a sudden one day Dr. Allnutt says, "Well, Dr. Frosch has turned in his resignation."

I said, "Why?"

He said, "Because President Carter was not re-elected, and a Republican President is taking over in January. So he's going to bring in his own people."

I said, "Okay." I mean, that was all very new to me. I had a little bit of exposure to the political influences when I worked in Legislative Affairs, but once I went to work for Mr. Allnutt, I really got to see how much of a change that could make in a government agency.

But while I was working for Mr. Allnutt, a couple of significant things happened. All that time and effort in Legislative Affairs paid off, and we were ready to fly a Shuttle. It was a peculiar situation, because the first Shuttle flight was April of 1981. President [Ronald W.] Reagan was sworn in, in January. For some reason, it took that White House a long time to get around to filling all of their political positions, and Dr. Frosch had resigned, okay?

So Dr. [Alan M.] Lovelace became the de facto Administrator. He was the career Deputy Administrator, and so he became the Acting Administrator at a time of significant programmatic activity in the agency, as we were leading up to the first flight of this reusable launch vehicle that we were going to fly every other day, and it was only going to cost—I won't even go there. I'll let the people who have all the expertise in that field, --I'm sure, have talked about it ad nauseum.

But we didn't really have a full-time leader. Mr. [James M.] Beggs and Dr. [Hans M.] Mark had been nominated, but were not in place, had not yet been confirmed, so Dr. Lovelace was really in charge. And we had the first Shuttle flight in April, and Mr. Beggs and Dr. Mark did not get sworn in as Administrator and Deputy Administrator until July. So it was a funny, odd time. It was really odd. And I thought, "Mr. Allnutt is going to leave. Mr. Beggs is going to come in here, this new Administrator is going to come in here, and he's going to want to off some people."

Mr. Allnutt said, "Well, maybe and maybe not, because I know Jim, because I knew him when he was here before."

Then I began to see how interwoven things could be, and that was a new experience, a real learning experience, to see how "it wasn't what you know but who you know" began to surface. And I was also working at a different level, so you got to see things that you didn't always see when you were further down in the depths of the organization.

So after Mr. Beggs became the Administrator, Mr. Allnutt started wearing many hats, because, I guess, Mr. Beggs did, in fact, know him and relied upon him, and he was suddenly not only the Associate Deputy Administrator, he was the head of External Relations. He had many irons in the fire.

A couple of the things that were just beginning to come to the forefront in government happened on his watch at NASA, so he was very actively engaged in the establishment of the Senior Executive Service [SES], which is that cadre of executives that—I don't know what they were before; I guess they were supergrades, you know, GS-18 or whatever. All of a sudden they created the Senior Executive Service. That didn't mean much to me at the time, but I knew it was a big deal. I knew it was a big deal, because I could tell.

Mr. Allnutt was another one of those people that, if you were receptive, you could learn so much from him, because he explained things, and he would share things with you. That was just amazing, because if I had questions, I could ask him, and he would tell me.

The other thing that happened at the beginning of President Reagan's administration was the creation of the Inspector General [IG] position. Mr. Allnutt was the Acting Inspector General for NASA until they made their first presidential appointment. That was a big deal for NASA, because that was the third presidential position that we had. To date, we only had two, Administrator and Deputy Administrator. All of a sudden there was an IG, which was a presidential appointment.

That was a big deal to be at the beginning of what kind of an influence that level position may or may not have on the agency, as well as the creation of the SES-level employees, the Senior Executive Service. Mr. Allnutt was very much involved in that, and working for him, I got to see all of that, the start-up process for that. Again, I've always had jobs where I've always been so damn busy that I haven't had a whole lot of time to—I knew these things were going on around me, but to put them in context; you know, to have the luxury of time. When you are a support person for somebody else, you're always on the phone, and you're always doing this, and you're always doing that. I didn't have a lot of time to myself.

But more of it was sinking in than I realized, because once my job began to change, and I wasn't working directly for somebody, taking care of them every minutes of every day as the secretary does, I had more time to put things in perspective and to learn what was going on around me than I did when I worked directly for somebody and they relied on you for everything. You know, you did their travel, and you did their calendar, and you did—you know. You talked to their wife, and you took care of this, and you took care of—.

I loved doing that. I don't know what's wrong with the workforce today, that women think that's demeaning. Shoot, that's how I learned everything. When I was somebody's secretary, I knew everything that was going on. When I evolved into other roles in the Administrator's office, I had to learn to become a private detective, because I didn't know what was going on, because I didn't work directly for one person. I wasn't the conduit or the filter. I had to go figure out how to find out what was going on, and so I missed that. It was great. You know, you worked for somebody and they trusted you, you knew everything that you needed to know to do your job and do it well. I found out that it wasn't at all demeaning.

WRIGHT: It's more rewarding, you mean?

SOPER: In today's workforce and in the last ten to fifteen years, and this goes back to this women and the glass ceiling, it's very different. Women view their jobs—nobody wants to be called a secretary today. They're an Executive Assistant. Well, it's just a word. You're doing the same thing, and what you're doing is important, because that person relies on you completely and totally. You have a confidentiality and a relationship, a support relationship there, that is

vital, if you work for someone you like and they like you and you have a good working relationship. If it's a bad match, then it's a bad match, no matter what you're doing.

But in today's workforce women don't want that connotation there. They want to be called something else, and they want it to look more like they're an equal, as opposed to a subordinate. Well, everybody's a subordinate. Everybody's got a boss. I don't know anybody that doesn't in the workforce, because even people that are at the—let's use CEOs [Chief Executive Officers] as an example. They've got a bloody Board of Directors. I mean, everybody's got a boss. So what you do is—that's a philosophical discussion for another time, not today. I'm digressing, and I have a bad habit of doing that.

[break]

SOPER: Okay, backing up to before I went to work in the Office of the Administrator, one of the things that was a lesson learned for me in the Office of Legislative Affairs in the seventies was that it was the first opportunity that I had to observe the difference in mindset and work style between corporate-level managers and government career-level managers. I had never, ever had the occasion to work with anyone who came from a corporate background until I went to work in that office, and it was very interesting to observe the difference between the corporate mindset and the bureaucratic mindset.

WRIGHT: That gave you an exposure to both sides.

SOPER: Yes, to both sides. Absolutely, and that was just something that I felt was a good learning experience for me that I would never have had had I not had the opportunity to work with someone who came into government from private industry. Of course, now it's very commonplace. You know, people change jobs. They don't stay in one area as they used to.

WRIGHT: Is there a way that you could describe, if you had to tell someone, the difference between a corporate mindset compared to the government mindset?

SOPER: I'd only be able to describe it if there were a circumstance that I could compare the two side by side. Going back to the days when I was in Legislative Affairs and working for a man who came into government from private industry, his approach to how he interacted with briefing the Hill on NASA's programs, he brought a different approach to it than the people who were career government employees. His approach was, he had a different marketing strategy, and just in the way he prepared his documents, he just approached it differently than the bureaucrats did. It was the first time I had ever gotten to see that side. You know, how does industry view NASA, and how would someone from private industry go forward and tell the Congress how important this legislation is, versus the way someone who was a government paper pusher would go up there and brief them.

The approaches were so completely different. The corporate personality did everything with visuals as opposed to paper. I mean, the government briefers were very big on prepared testimony, whereas the people that I was observing who had an industry background would go up and they'd wing it. They would just talk off the cuff and just, you could see, had much more experience in selling an idea, as opposed to just saying, "Here's our idea," and giving them a

piece of paper and having it be replete with technical jargon. They knew how to pitch it differently. I just thought that was interesting to observe, and I learned a lot from watching the difference between those two styles.

WRIGHT: Did that experience and exposure help you in your next level of job that you had at NASA?

SOPER: Well, I didn't know it at the time, but I'm sure it did. I'm sure it did, because throughout the years, my later years, I had to deal with many, many more people who came from different walks of life. The workforce started changing, and so you weren't always dealing with people who started out their career in government and stayed with it. They criss-crossed all over the map. Some came from academia, and some came from industry, and some came from other agencies. So I guess it really did help me to understand the difference between—and it wasn't until later that I saw how people who came in to work in NASA in the civilian space program, but had a military background. Their approach to a problem or to problem solving or to how they managed an area was very different, because they brought their military background and their rigid, by-the-book—routine kind of approach to things.

So it was a way of—you absorb and pick up and understand more than you realize at the time. "Oh, gee, this is going to help me down the road if I pay attention to the way this person operates." You don't even realize you're doing that, but then somebody it all comes back, and you think, "Ah, I remember when I had to deal with, a former Commandant of the Marine Corps, how his approach to doing this was completely different from the guy who worked at the university level."

WRIGHT: I guess it keeps you flexible, in a way, because you saw so many different areas through those years, and you were able to adjust.

SOPER: Yes, and you had to go with the flow. You had to go with the flow. That's what it was all about. To this day, it's what it's all about. If you want to get along, you've got to go along. You're not going to change the mindset of people. Everybody approaches a problem or their role or their job differently, and they approach it with the experience that they've gained over the years from what they did before. Yes, they're coming in and they're learning a new problem or a new area, but how they handle what they have to do in that task comes from the background that they have developed over the years.

I get a big kick out of Dr. [Michael D.] Griffin, now the current Administrator, who in almost every talk he gives or every exchange he has with people when he's met with the press or done Q&As [questions and answers] on NASA Television, he'll almost always work into the conversation, "Hey, I don't know about that. I'm just a rocket scientist." I mean, he uses that phrase a lot, and what I'm hearing is, "Yeah, I have this field of expertise, but there's a lot I don't know about, so tell me." So you don't realize at the time that you cross paths with people of such diverse business backgrounds that you're going to actually learn something from what they've brought to their approach to the job, but it sticks with you.

WRIGHT: Well, that may be a good chance for us to move into your next level that you were doing in the front office. You said your role changed?

SOPER: Well, it did. It didn't change like drastically overnight. It sort of evolved. It kind of started to evolve when Mr. Beggs became Administrator. He started assigning different people to different jobs in the office, and I ended up doing more of the "horse holder" type of things for him. He didn't travel with a big entourage of people, but he was adamant about—as most Administrators are when there is a high-profile event going on—their physical presence there is just what everybody expects.

During the time that Jim Beggs was the Administrator, we were really at the peak of the Shuttle launch rate. The missions were very close together. It was in the early days, so there were a lot of firsts, first female and first African-American and first all-military crew.

So with every first came more of an opportunity for the agency to market the audience differently. They would approach a different audience of people to come and be there and witness it firsthand, because the philosophy was this is how you're going to bring people on board and how you're going to get support for the program, is to show them what you're doing. Let them see it. Let them experience it and feel it firsthand.

Mr. Beggs was very, very active in engaging his wife [Mary Beggs] in the things that he did representing the agency. She was very representative with him. She was always with him for these major milestones, and she was an active individual herself and had a lot of clubs and organizations that she belonged to. She would have events at NASA where NASA astronauts would talk to these embassy wives and different organizations that she belonged to. She was very active on the board at Wolf Trap, and she would stage these little doo-dahs down at NASA and get NASA Program Managers to come and brief these women.

I started getting involved in staffing a lot of those things for Mrs. Beggs and working with her on that. That was a totally different aspect or departure from what I had been doing.

That was fun. It was really fun, and that was when I started doing a lot of traveling, because if she wanted to have something going on in conjunction with a launch, you would have to do all the inviting and the staff work on the front end and then go down there to be there to work it at the time of the mission. She was just a very, very active participant in everything Mr. Beggs did as Administrator.

That's another thing that's been interesting to observe, the roles that the various spouses take, particularly the Administrators' wives. Some are extremely active, and others want to keep their distance and will only do the things that are required, the representational things that are absolutely required, the must-dos, as opposed to the, "Well, gee, let's do this." It was interesting to be in that office in that job, in a staff job, at a time when we kept changing personalities, because each time there was an Administrator's change, you had to deal with the spouse change at the same time.

Mrs. Beggs was a very, very active proponent in Mr. Beggs' role as NASA Administrator, and when Dr. [James C.] Fletcher came back the second time, Fay Fletcher was 180 degrees in the other direction. You never saw her. She never popped in. I mean, there were things that she would go to with Dr. Fletcher that were required and that sort of thing. But just so completely different, her role was completely different than Mrs. Beggs'.

That was one of the things, that I found myself doing more staff work on special projects and social type of events, which I felt was potential for growth, because it taught me a lot about protocol and things I had to go out there and learn that I didn't know. That when somebody is talking at a podium and you have the American flag and another flag, that there is a specific position for those flags. If you don't have them placed in the proper position, it's a terrible breach of protocol. So that was, again, something that there wasn't any manual for that. You

just had to kind of figure it out or go find out. "Oops, I guess we better find out how we position the flags," you know, that kind of thing. While it was a whole lot of very busy work, there was a lot of learning experience from it, and I'm grateful for having had the opportunity to learn that much.

I always said that the job really evolved over the years into a very well paid babysitting job, because I was there doing a lot of hand-holding and a lot of damage control, behind people who were very busy and had the big picture in focus and didn't have time to worry those level of details. And if that's what they wanted somebody on the staff to do, and that was what I was being paid to do, then that was what I was going to do, because that was what they needed me to do. If it meant washing the dishes in between meetings in the conference room, then that's what you did, and it didn't matter that it wasn't something that you could say, "Well, what did you do today?"

"Well, I served coffee three times, because we had *x* number of—." If that's what it took to keep things moving, that's what you did to keep things moving.

WRIGHT: Does any event in particular during this time period stand out, or several events?

SOPER: Oh yes, a lot of them. [Laughs]

WRIGHT: Would you share some of these with us?

SOPER: Oh, god. Well, I guess we'd have to move forward to other Administrators.

WRIGHT: Let me ask, though, while you're talking about Mr. Beggs, how did it affect your job when he had to take his leave of absence?

SOPER: Oh, that's a whole 'nother story. That was one of the things that I list under significant experiences was that very stressful and very unfortunate situation, which was compounded by the fact that Mr. Beggs had been without a Deputy Administrator for a fairly long period of time. Dr. Mark had left the agency and gone to head up the University of Texas system, I believe. He and Mr. Beggs had a very separate arrangement for managing the agency, anyway. Mr. Beggs did all of the external stuff, and Dr. Mark had his own little world of intergovernmental activities and that kind of stuff.

After Dr. Mark left and Mr. Beggs was alone, I do remember that he spent a good deal of time actively trying to get the administration to focus on the fact that he really needed a Deputy. That was, I believe, toward the latter part of President Reagan's second term, and from a political standpoint in Washington, they're not focused on hiring new people at that time. I guess they're focused on who are they going to get to run the White House after they're gone. That does enter into the whole appointment process.

Mr. Beggs went a long time without a Deputy, and then when names started being put out there for consideration, apparently none of the candidates that were being considered were people that he had recommended. Just right about the time—if I remember correctly—right about the time that it was either announced or the nomination had gone forward, of Bill [William R.] Graham for Deputy Administrator, Mr. Beggs then was indicted for some activity that took place while he was with, I believe, General Dynamics. He went on record both with the

President and with the agency and said that, "This is ridiculous. This should not be, and I'm going to have to pursue my defense of this erroneous indictment."

But he also knew without a Deputy Administrator in place that he could not leave the agency and go off and do that, because there would be no one there to run the agency. We were heavy into Shuttle launch activity, and we were getting ready for the Teacher in Space mission, which was a very high profile mission. Dr. Graham was appointed. He was confirmed, approved by the Senate and confirmed, appointed by the President. Came into the agency in like November, and Mr. Beggs was trying to work the work of the agency and his own personal situation.

It was fairly evident that these two people were not going to work well together. Mr. Beggs was, I think, pretty vocal in saying, "This was not my choice for Deputy." It was like Graham no sooner got there, and the situation with Mr. Beggs' indictment heated up, and he felt that the only way he was going to be able to clear himself from these erroneous charges was to step down from his role as NASA Administrator and just go off an do this, but he didn't want to do that, because he felt that the Deputy Administrator didn't have the necessary background to run the agency.

So that kind of tension and distress was evident for a couple of months, and you could see it and feel it in the office. There was a period of time where I got up every morning, and it was like, there's my boss on the front page of the *Washington Post* again. It was like they wouldn't leave him alone. That was very hard to deal with, very, very stressful, and very difficult for all of the staff to come in every day and try to proceed with business as usual when there was all this awful media attention on the Administrator, and you knew the Administrator had a job to do.

Then all of a sudden, you know, we had this launch, and the rest is history, as they say. Once that happened, in January—it was awful, because Mr. Beggs felt then that the only real thing for him to do so that the agency could then move ahead and get another Administrator in there who had the expertise to pull everything up and get it back on track, because he did not feel that Dr. Graham had the experience to do that.

So he felt that he had to resign so that the President could find another Administrator that he could bring in and put everything back together, because the *Challenger* accident was so completely different from the Apollo 204 accident. I mean, first of all, it happened right on television for the whole world to see. That had never happened before. And there was a private citizen on that flight, and it was very, very hard to work through that, very hard.

The other thing that happened was that the agency didn't, because of the internal strife or whatever you want to call it, or turmoil that we were undergoing between the Administrator and his personal issue, a new Deputy Administrator who really didn't have that much experience, agency experience, under his belt. At the time this happened he had only been two months on the job, just two months.

The White House immediately appointed an external Accident Investigation Board headed up by William [P.] Rogers, and that had its own impact on the agency, because it was totally external. Other things we had problems with in the past were resolved by the people who knew everything there was to know about what went wrong. This was the first time we had a completely external group of people looking at the situation. People will tell you that were very close to it, certainly closer than I was, that that hurt the agency, because it just prolonged the investigation and the outcome of the investigation, by having it elevated to that level of commission.

WRIGHT: Were you involved with the investigation experience?

SOPER: Well, not really. I was involved in everything that was going on in the office, and there was so much going on in the office at that time, with the transition between Mr. Beggs leaving, Dr. Graham trying to run things. He was so new, and brought only a few people in with him. I guess he didn't know who he could trust to do stuff and who he couldn't. That was very, very difficult. It was a very difficult period of time, because you had people sitting side by side that were not communicating with each other. He wasn't using any of Mr. Beggs' staff, yet he didn't have that many of his own people to use. That was the first time you really began to see what I consider to be a real political influence in the office.

You know, that's how I saw it from where I sat. I mean, it was evident that you had two different factions here. Then I can't even remember, to be honest with you, how it turned out that they convinced Dr. Fletcher to come back. I really think it was just based on the circumstances. People have a tremendous loyalty to the NASA program, and once it's in your blood, it never leaves. And he did. He left the University of Utah and came back to become Administrator for the second time. He came into it and said, "I'm here to return the agency to flight. I've done this job once. I'm not looking for it to be a long-term thing. I have a mission. My mission is to return this program, turn it around. So that's what I'm here to do."

His approach to that was to bring back the people that had worked with him the first time around, because he knew them and he trusted them. So we had this complete turnover of people, and then everybody in the field trying to duck, because there was this search for the guilty, you know, like it was some witch hunt. Like one person was responsible for that.

Accidents, to me, are exactly what they are, accidents. Nobody goes in with the intent to have something like that happen. So, I mean, if there were mistakes along the way or compromises in safety along the way, to my mind they weren't done willfully. You know, to err is human, and no matter how hard we strive for perfection, sometimes it isn't there.

A lot of the people that were being targeted and blamed—it was a very hard thing to watch, a very hard thing, day after day, to read about. By that time, by the mid- to late eighties, media coverage was very different than it was in the sixties, so it was blatant. It was in your face. It was there all the time.

WRIGHT: It was after Watergate.

SOPER: Yes, after Watergate is a good way to describe it. That was a very difficult time, very difficult time.

WRIGHT: Did you have any thoughts at that time about leaving NASA?

SOPER: No. I never had any thoughts about leaving. I knew that the only way you were going to get into management or move up the ladder was to move around. That was one of the big things I learned from Mr. Allnutt. He said, "You can't stay in the same job longer than three years, or you'll never get anywhere. You've got to move."

Well, I guess I always liked what I was doing, and the only thing that ever made me move was the chance to get a promotion. Even then it was hard to do. What ended up happening to me personally was I ended up having a career, and I didn't really start out to have a

career. I started out with a job, and that's where the women's movement, I think, really started making a big difference in the way women approached—I mean, if I were starting out today, I wouldn't have the same philosophy toward the way I did my job, because first of all, the times are different. The opportunities are different. Your educational background is different.

I was always fortunate in that I worked in a place where I was always so busy and always so engaged that I never had the time to stop and say, "Well, what's in it for me? Where am I going?" I was always as –there's a quote, and I'm trying to think of it. It's something like, "The truly ambitious are as busy on the landings as they are breathless on the stairs," or something to that effect. I was always so breathless on the stairs that I didn't ever stop and take the time to say, "Okay, well, where is this getting me? Where do I want to be ten years from now?" I didn't have that kind of a mindset.

Why would I leave NASA and go work someplace else in government? It is the most fascinating place in government to work. I've always thought that, and I still think that. The people that work there are passionate about it. I'm passionate about it, and I'll probably go to my grave being passionate about it. So unless I were going to have a midcourse correction and change fields and go do something else, or I really wanted to climb the business ladder because I had these lofty goals—which are fine; I just never had them—I was very happy doing what I was doing. So, no, I didn't think about leaving, and I felt, "God, I couldn't leave now."

WRIGHT: When did you see things start to change more for the positive after *Challenger*?

SOPER: Oh, as soon as we returned to flight. You know, it was like it took two and a half years to pull yourself up by the bootstraps and get back out there. Then things started to change again. Dr. Fletcher said, "Sayonara. Okay, I've done my little thing. I'm out of here."

They appointed Admiral [Richard H.] Truly, and I thought, "Well, this is probably very good. This is probably a really, really good thing, because who better to run the space agency than a former astronaut?" He had the management experience. The last thing he had been doing was running the [US Navy, Naval Sea Systems Command, Naval Surface Warfare Center Dahlgren Division, Dahlgren, VA].

I thought, "Oh, wow, this is good." The person that they hired to be his Deputy was, also. It was, I think—I believe—the first time there was a complete change in management, and all the people were hired from within the ranks, because Mr. [James R. "J. R."] Thompson [Jr.] was Center Director at Marshall [Space Flight Center, Huntsville, AL]. Admiral Truly was head of the Office of Manned Space Flight at the time, or Human Space Flight or whatever, at Headquarters. I thought, "Maybe that's what we need right now." So I viewed that as a real positive thing for the agency. That would have been, let's see, '89 to '91, I believe. Yes. Refer to Josie's list, yes. I'm doing this from memory, as you can see.

WRIGHT: You're doing wonderful. [Laughs]

SOPER: Admiral Truly's tenure was very strange for me. My job changed again, because he had people that had been working for him, because he was already in there, and so he wanted those people to be with him in his office, and same thing with Mr. Thompson. Because he was already in the agency, he brought several people with him from Marshall. So my job changed. I wasn't

doing the same kinds of things for that Administrator that I did for the previous Administrator and Dr. Fletcher.

When Mr. Beggs was there and when Dr. Fletcher was there, I did all of their trip coordinating. Whenever they went anywhere, I'd handled [it] all—their secretaries didn't do that. I did it. Don't ask me how that happened, but it did. Anyway, so I ended up becoming a travel agent for the Administrator, and I did that for both Beggs and Fletcher.

Then when Admiral Truly became Administrator, he had a secretary that had worked for him for a number of years, and she was used to do—so she did it. So I did other things; I mean, there's always work to do in a busy office. But I ended up not doing the same kind of direct things for the Administrator that I did for the previous Administrators.

Then all of a sudden Admiral Truly got himself in hot water with the White House, and the next thing I knew—talk about unprecedented things happening—he was basically asked to leave, and when he said he didn't want to do that, then they took action and made him leave. Well, that was a first Administrator I had worked for that had been fired, essentially.

So that was pretty significant and pretty devastating and pretty tough to deal with. That was, again, a definite sign that there were external forces that had a great deal of influence on what was going on down at NASA. It started in the eighties toward the end, and then it picked back up again when Admiral Truly left.

They bounced around a few names. He announced that he would step down, effective such and such a date, while the President searched for a new Administrator, and the next thing you knew, in a very short period of time, about a month, this name surfaced that nobody ever heard of, Dan [Daniel S.] Goldin. Who the heck is Dan Goldin? Never heard of him. Well, that

doesn't mean he can't do the job. But, I mean, you know what you got, but you never know what you're getting type thing. So there was this, "Okay, well, we're getting a new Administrator."

It was absolutely bizarre, because there was no transition. Admiral Truly was in the office and effectively in charge until the thirty-first of March, whereupon he packed up his stuff, no big fanfare, no big hoopla. And on April the first, Mr. Goldin showed up and was sworn in and hit the ground running. One of the first things he wanted to do was get on an airplane and go down to Kennedy. There was a Flight Readiness Review, and he wanted to be there.

He came through the office that day after he was sworn in, and he went around and he introduced himself to everybody. "Hi, I'm Dan Goldin." In about an hour I had somebody who was acting as the Staff Director or Executive Officer at the time—I can't even remember who it was. I don't think it was Jesse Harris [phonetic]. I think it was somebody else. It might have been Sam Geller [phonetic]—came to me and said, "The Administrator needs an airplane to go down to the Cape tonight." So his first day on the job, I had to get cracking and schedule—find an airplane and coordinate and plan the logistics for his trip.

The other thing he did on the first day he got there was he got on NASA internal television and addressed all the employees. That was a surprise to everybody. I mean, it was like, I mean, he hit the ground running, just [demonstrates sound]. And it was ten years of that. It never stopped. After Mr. Goldin left, I had four pages of changes to the staff [who had worked] in the front office. We went through so many people that I kept a running list, because nobody could remember. He literally burnt people out. The man had just an amazing amount of energy. He wrote the manual on how to be a space cadet. He just believed and lived and breathed—every breath he took had to do with that agency. I could probably count the times on one hand that I heard the man talk about something other than NASA.

So after he got there, of course, the whole front office changed again. He didn't have a Deputy, either. They were able to find a new Administrator, but they couldn't find a Deputy. At that time it was the tail end of the first President [George H. W.] Bush's administration, and he didn't get reelected. So the next thing you knew, we had a change of administration, and in came a whole brand-new crop of players. But there sat Mr. Goldin.

WRIGHT: Yes, because it was not just a new administration, it was a new party.

SOPER: Yes. After twelve years of Republicans, in came the Democrats. But there sat Mr. Goldin. I am convinced Mr. Goldin would still be the NASA Administrator today if he had his choice. We kiddingly in the office referred to him as the "Administrator for life." That was the way he viewed the job. He just lived it and breathed it and loved every minute of it. It was amazing to watch. I mean, he drove people nuts.

WRIGHT: How were you swept up in these changes?

SOPER: The first year was very difficult, because he decided he needed a Chief of Staff, and the person that he chose for Chief of Staff was—he didn't make very good personnel decisions, hiring decisions. He was very good at a lot of things, but that was not his strong suit. The first person he had helping him from the first day he came into the office was Mr. Abbey. Abbey is one of those figures in NASA's history that you either love or you hate. There is nothing in between. You either absolutely hate him or you adore him. Mr. Abbey had been working at the

Space Council, and told Mr. Goldin that he was probably instrumental in finding Mr. Goldin for the job. I don't know; I can't remember, to be honest with you.

But when Mr. Goldin first arrived, he didn't have anybody to bring with him, so he didn't have any ally, anybody really close, you know, a trusted ally that he brought with him, to help him. Every senior person needs that, whether it's in the form of their secretary or a staff person, or—it doesn't matter what the role. If they don't have somebody close from the day they walk in the door, I just think it makes it that much harder for them to do their job. They need a trusted ally in some close staff role, even if it's only one. One's enough. He didn't bring anybody in with him, so the closest thing he had to an ally or a trusted compadre was Mr. Abbey.

So after he started staffing up the front office, he pulled in a couple of Center Directors to play Acting Deputy Administrator, because that was the smart thing to do. I mean, you get the expertise in here. I mean, [Paul F.] Holloway was there. Aaron Cohen was there. I mean, Roy [S.] Estess was there. These were all people that had knowledge of the agency and the agency's best interests at heart and could run the internal stuff for him while he was off selling the program or doing whatever it was Administrators do when they first come into a job, because nobody knows a job or what that job is going to be till they've done it for a year.

I'll digress for a minute and tell you a little story about me and Dr. Griffin. I knew him when he was there the first time around. He was the Chief Engineer, and he was the head of the Exploration Office. Then all of a sudden one day the next thing I knew, Dr. Griffin was leaving. Again, there was so much intrigue and so many changes during Mr. Goldin's tenure that it was hard to keep pace. I just knew something had happened. There had been some kind of a falling-out, because the next thing I knew, Mike Griffin was leaving. So subsequently I found out that

he and Mr. Goldin didn't see eye to eye, and so that relationship ended. Mike went on with his life.

When he was nominated to be NASA Administrator last year—just a little more than a year ago, because it all happened in the February-March time frame, right after Mr. [Sean] O'Keefe had announced his departure—somebody called me and said, "Do you remember Mike Griffin?"

I said, "Of course I remember Mike Griffin."

"Oh, okay. Well, what was he like?"

I said, "He was a nice man." I didn't work for him personally; I had a kind of a surface relationship with him.

Well, anyway, when he came back, he was sworn in on a Thursday, and he came into the office very briefly after an informal swearing in at the White House, and he was by himself. Our White House liaison, J. T. Jezierski [phonetic], met him downstairs and brought him up to the office. We knew he was coming in that day, and he was in the office like at seven o'clock, very early. He's an early bird. He got in. I knew he was coming in. I was in my office about seven-thirty. J. T. called me up, came over and said to me, "Josie, Dr. Griffin's here, and I'm with him over in his office, and we need you over there real quick."

I said, "Okay." So I ran over to the other side of the suite with J. T., and I walked into the Administrator's office, and there was Mike, and I said, "Good morning, Dr. Griffin. Welcome back." I went up to him, and I [demonstrates].

He said, "Mike, Josie. It's Mike, remember? I was here before, and just call me Mike."

I said, "Okay," I said, "but when you were here before, you weren't the NASA Administrator."

He said, "I'm still the same person."

I said, "Okay, but you got a different job."

"Ah, no. No. I'm just Mike. It's just me. I'm happy you're still here, and we're going to be working together." He was very pleasant, very cordial; went about his business.

I don't know how long ago this was, but it was several months ago— I was in his assistant's office, in Carol Mays' office, and he came back into the suite from—he'd been down to the Health Unit. He was getting ready to go on an overseas trip. I was in with Carol; we were engaged in dialogue. And he walked into Carol's office, and he said, "You know, I don't know why some things have to be so hard." He said, "You know," he said, "I can't believe this. All I wanted to do was get a shot and blah, blah, blah, and everybody—." He was grousing about something that had just transpired.

I looked at him, and I said, "I told you." I said, "Don't you remember that morning you called me into your office?" I said, "I warned you that everything was going to be different once you became the NASA Administrator."

He said, "Yeah, I know you did." He shook his head and said, "Yeah, I know you did."

I really meant that, but I said to him, I said, "You don't have the same job. It's not what it was when you were here before."

Because he came in, and he's a very independent personality, and he doesn't like all this fussing and an entourage going behind him, and he's just, "Leave me alone. I'm on a mission. I know what I'm doing." You know, extremely low maintenance; we have an expression, "high maintenance," "low maintenance." Where Administrators are concerned, Mike Griffin is the lowest maintenance Administrator I've ever seen in my life. He's down to earth. I mean, he's very approachable. He is just, for a man as brilliant as he is, with all the seven or eight

[educational] degrees that he's got, I mean, you know, he just is like—walk in, "Hi Mike, how are you?," "Oh, I'm fine. Hey, how are you?"

All the computer people, support people, they call him Mike. "Call me Mike." And the movers, they call him Mike. They don't know the difference; you know what I'm saying? He says, "Call me Mike," they call him Mike, okay?

They don't have the kind of jobs where it is awkward to have the Administrator get on the elevator and have one of the moving people in the building say, "Hey, Mike, how are you?"

I mean, the rest of the workforce just kind of like thinks, "Who is this impertinent young man talking to the Administrator like that?" But that's what he wants. He's unassuming. I mean, that's him. That's his personality.

He just had his one-year anniversary. April the eighteenth was two days ago, or yesterday, was the date where it was his first full day on the job. Nine new people came in with him that day a year ago last April. I sent them all an e-mail yesterday, and I said, "Okay, it's a year later. Now, tell me. Tell me how you feel a year later." [Laughs] NASA's a hard place to assimilate into quickly. It really is.

But anyway, I got off track to tell you that funny story about Dr. Griffin, because it's the truth. I was thrilled and delighted that somebody was coming back in that I knew, but by the same token, he wasn't going to be the same person I knew when he was the Chief Engineer under Dan Goldin. (*A*), times have changed. The world has changed. The focus has changed. And he has got a different role. When you roll all that up together, it makes for a significant different mode of operation; it really does.

So anyway, Mr. Goldin—back to Mr. Goldin—it was tough. It was really tough keeping up with—I started out doing all the trips for him like I did for all the other Administrators.

Everything with Mr. Goldin mushroomed. It started out this big; it got that big. [Demonstrates] We had more people. By the time we were ready to move into the offices that the Administrator's suite are in right now, we had to do construction before we could move in there, because we had too many people on staff and didn't have enough offices to put them in. The space in the new building was negotiated under Dr. Fletcher's tenure. It was finalized under Admiral Truly's tenure. Admiral Truly designed the layout of the NASA Administrator's suite, and by the time we moved into it in February of '93, he wasn't in charge.

Mr. Goldin didn't have any interest in that. That was not a level of detail that he had any interest in. As long as it hummed like a well-oiled machine, he didn't care what it looked like. So he didn't want to make any changes. But some of the people that supported him did, and so by the time we—that's on my list of difficult things I've had to do in all the years that I've worked there.

If I had to tell you what were some of the difficult periods that I had to live through, the Headquarters Building consolidation period was really, really rough, because Mr. Goldin was the type of personality that we didn't shut down the office to move the Administrator from one building to another. Business continued as usual where he was concerned. Well, moving from one building to another was a big deal. The NASA Administrator's office had been in FB-6 since about 1960. We had twenty-some years' worth of stuff that we had to go through and herd and corral and move. It was only down the street, but that was one of the hardest things I had to do, and still do the day-to-day stuff, because I was very involved in that consolidation project and the physical move, the actual, physical move, of the office, because he didn't want to have the move impact what needed to be done.

Well, you can't move and do business as usual. At some point you shut down. You shut down the phones. You unplug the computer. You pack up all your toys in a box, and you're not able to function until you can turn that back around. That was very hard. That was extremely hard. We couldn't pack Mr. Goldin's office up until he left that Friday night. He was famous for staying on into the night, okay? When he came in that following Monday morning, the man who was in charge of the project, who was Chris Christianson at the time, said to me, "This office has got to look exactly the way the office looked up the street when Dan left on Friday night."

So there was a whole cadre of people that worked round the clock from Friday night until Monday morning to make that happen, to include having all the portraits of the Administrators and previous Administrators hanging on the wall just like they were in the old suite. "When Dan walks in Monday morning, I don't want it to look like anything different."

That was really hard. That was really, really hard. If I had to do that at this point—I was, well, '93, fifteen years younger, because we moved in February of '93. Mr. Goldin had just been there—it was right after his first year. And that move was a phased move. They moved people in in stages. The actual consolidation project took two full years to complete from start to finish. And it was a big change, because we went to an open landscape setting. We went to a digital phone system. I mean, it represented a lot of changes, not just a physical office move.

WRIGHT: Changes in technology?

SOPER: There were technology changes, as well, that were coupled with that, so it was major. It was significant. It really was. It damn near killed me. [Laughs] It really did, because I was

getting just old enough that I was beginning to not be able to work at that pace. It was hard. That was really, really, really hard. So that was one of the big things that happened under Mr. Goldin's watch that impacted me personally.

Then just the steady stream of training new staff. Every time I turned around we were changing staff, from senior level to worker bees. I mean, we couldn't even keep a receptionist. We had such a turnover in that period that Mr. Goldin was the Administrator, it was amazing. I think when Mr. O'Keefe became Administrator, I think there were like two or three of us left in the office that had been there the whole time of Mr. Goldin, maybe two—and I'm one of them—that had been there the whole time Mr. Goldin was—he was the Administrator for a long time. That, in and of itself, is unprecedented. I mean, people don't stay in jobs that long, as a rule. They move around. I know I'm a bit of an oddball.

WRIGHT: Especially in his [Goldin] background and that kind of position.

SOPER: Yes, and in that kind of a position. Very unusual.

WRIGHT: One of the things that, when we were doing some research, that seemed to be a little bit unique during that time period was the demonstrations or protests, and some things that may have resulted from the proposed Cassini launch.

SOPER: Well, actually, not that much. You know, I'm going to tell you exactly what resulted from that. He said, "We're locking the doors."

WRIGHT: This was the doors to your suite?

SOPER: Yes. You couldn't get in without a badge that was programmed to open the doors. That was a logistics nightmare for people like me and other members of the staff, who had to make sure that there was always somebody there to let people in. I was forever working with Security to give people badge access, because if you programmed the badges, when we moved into that building, everything is run off a mainframe computer, and the computer controls the alarm system, which opens and closes all the doors, and the emergency egress system; the whole fire alarm, the door alarms, and that kind of stuff.

So after that protest he said, "We're locking the doors." Well, simple thing for the Administrator to say. A lot of work for people down in the trenches. The trickle-down effect was a lot.

WRIGHT: And woe the day his badge didn't let him in, huh? [Laughs]

SOPER: Oh, and that happened many times.

WRIGHT: Oh, no.

SOPER: Oh yes, because badges are computers. It's the old "garbage-in, garbage-out" syndrome. When the chip went bad and his badge didn't work, Mr. Goldin had about six badges, because we were always—I forget how many badges we turned in when he actually left, because he would forget them. We'd keep a couple in the office, or they would keep one downstairs at the

guard's desk in case he came in without his badge. Oh yes, because without your badge, you couldn't unlock the door.

Parts of it were funny. You had to see the humor in it, because if you didn't, you would just end up—there isn't any point in getting stressed over, even though we all, as human beings, allow it to happen from time to time, things that are out of your control. I mean, it just—get excited, get frustrated, vent, and then move on. Put on your big-girl panties and just move on, because you can't change it, so, you know.

I have to tell you something about Mr. Goldin that I will always admire in him. From the day he got there, he said, "Hey, I'm not here to win any popularity contests. I'm here to do a job." I used to call him the "WYSIWYG Administrator," what you see is what you get. He was constant. He was that way till the day he walked out the door. If I ran into him on the street, I'm not sure he would know me, or remember my name, and yet I sat twenty-five feet outside his door and held all of his support staff together for almost ten years. Because they all needed counseling from time to time. They needed a place to go to vent, to talk.

I have ended up becoming the de facto office psychiatrist. It started, basically, when Mr. Goldin became the Administrator, because everybody reaches a point where they've got to just walk away and go talk to somebody, you know. Don't know how that fell to me, but it did.

So you listen, and you say, "Okay, yeah, but you're not going to change him. You know he's—." The man was—what's the—I always say it wrong; indefatigable—I don't know how to pronounce it. It's got so many syllables, I always say it incorrectly. He never ran out of steam. I was always amazed at that. I mean, they did so much traveling. We used to call it "The Dan Goldin Traveling Road Show." I mean, I stopped doing the trips. We had, at one point, three people staffing all his travel. You had a person doing the airplanes, a person doing all the

reservations, and a person doing the nuts and bolts, the program part of what do we do when we—it was a traveling road show. And he never went anywhere all alone. He always had an entourage. Always had an entourage.

WRIGHT: He was there on 9/11 [September 11, 2001]. Tell me about what happened or how NASA reacted to the events that were happening in D.C., and how you were affected in the building as well.

SOPER: Well, I was smoking at the time, and I went up on the roof to have a cigarette, because it was all over the television. By this time we had the Internet, and we had NASA Television. Every office has a television.

I went up on the roof and could see what was going on over at the Pentagon, and I thought, "Holy crap, this is scary." Went back down to my office, and Courtney [A.] Stadd , [NASA Chief of Staff] was working there at the time, and Courtney said, "Mr. Goldin's going to go through the building and wants to deliver a message of concern to everybody." Courtney went with him, and they went to every office in the building, telling people to—well, there were some issues that they were concerned about.

You know, we had a lot of, and still do have, a very diverse workforce, and some of the people are—oh, god, what is Doreen Simms [phonetic]? I'm sorry. I'm getting brain dead. She wears the—Islamic, okay? They knew a number of people in the building, and they didn't want them to feel intimidated or threatened by what they were hearing in the news about this being a terrorist attack, and that they should not feel that they were suffering any danger because of what was going on externally. That was one of the reasons why Mr. Goldin wanted to go to

everybody's office and say, "Hey, we're doing the best we can, and we're going to make sure everybody's safety is first and foremost."

NASA had a very active role in that. I remember they went up to New York, and they visited the World Trade Center site. We had a lot of things that the agency contributed to as a group.

It was very, it was kind of frightening. We implemented some new security things; well, all of the government did, of course, and there was a bigger emphasis put on emergency preparedness. Of course, all of those kinds of things are going on in conjunction with the day-to-day activities. I mean, events, external events, have caused the entire workforce to have to change the way they do things, and NASA was no exception. I mean, we had a lot of programs that are very expensive and intricate and not necessarily classified, but assets to protect. So there was a great deal of attention channeled on that, in addition to everything else that was still going on.

Then shortly thereafter, because that was 2001, Mr. Goldin announced his departure. That was another transition that happened very, very rapidly. Mr. O'Keefe, of course, was already a member of the administration, so once his nomination was put forward, that transition—we were only like a month without an Administrator on site, with just Dr. [Daniel R.] Mulville acting in that capacity. I mean, that transition happened very, very quickly, from the time Mr. Goldin left in November to Mr. O'Keefe being sworn in and being down there as Administrator. the end of December.

I thought, "Oh, god, not during the holidays," and sure enough. Sure enough, he was sworn in December the twenty-first. I thought, "Oh, god, only in Washington would we do this." I mean, there goes everybody's holiday plans right down the tube. [Laughter] But when you

work in that kind of an environment, you have to just kind of expect that. Things happen. They don't always happen on your timetable, you know.

WRIGHT: And now you had another Administrator that hadn't worked with NASA before.

SOPER: Right. Big learning curve. Nice man, very political. Very cordial, very personable, very approachable, but very political, and a different approach to how to do the job. The approach was more of—I would have thought it would have been budgetary, and it was anything but. Mr. Goldin was very judicious about a lot of things, and Mr. O'Keefe was 180 degrees in the other direction. You know, you always compare it to what you knew, to the last thing you knew. Then, of course, when we changed last year between Mr. O'Keefe and Dr. Griffin, we went 180 degrees back again. I mean, it's amazing how one person can change the whole way you do business.

WRIGHT: Mr. O'Keefe was there just a year when *Columbia* happened.

SOPER: Yes. I think Mr. O'Keefe took that very personally. I mean, he personally was very greatly affected by that. Maybe he had come to know some of the crew members. I can't say I knew any of them individually, unlike some of the *Challenger* (STS-51L) crew members that I did know. I did not know any of the *Columbia* crew. But it was the same kind of reaction, same kind of a response.

I got up on a Saturday morning and went down to get my hair done, and they (crew of STS-107) were scheduled to land at Kennedy at like nine o'clock that morning. I'm in the

hairdresser, and I come out to the car, and I turn on the radio, and I'm hearing what I hear on the radio, and I thought, "Oh, my god, not again."

Of course, this one unfurled and played out in front of God and everybody just like *Challenger*, and it was such a feeling of—well, the place I go to get my hair done is in D.C. It's downtown in D.C., right up near the White House, right up near where I first started working. I got in my car, and I got on my cell phone, and I called my mother, and I said, "I'm not coming over today, Mother." I said, "I have to go down to the office," I said, "because we've had an accident." I said, "I'll talk to you later." So I drove right back down to the building, parked the car and went upstairs, and the entire office was filled with people. Courtney was there. Scott Pace [NASA Deputy Chief of Staff] was there. Everybody had the same reaction. You heard the news. You just got in your car and went to work, because you knew there were going to be things that needed to be done.

Well, O'Keefe was down at Kennedy, and his exec was with him. Shiron [D. Gaines] was with him. Aretha [phonetic] didn't go on that trip; Shiron went. So he was down at the Cape, but Fred [Frederick D. Gregory] [NASA Deputy Administrator] came in, Fred Gregory. Courtney was in. People just came in to know that there would be things that needed to be done, and what needed to be done was appoint an Accident Investigation Board.

You always learn from mistakes, and NASA learned from *Challenger* that the first thing you do is you appoint an internal investigation team. So Mr. O'Keefe had his own thoughts on who he wanted to get to run it, and it was a question of finding the people, getting them to consent to doing it, getting it all in place, and then going to the White House and saying, "We've got our team. They're ready to start."

There was a tremendous amount of emphasis placed on the families, more than I remember there being during *Challenger*. I don't know why I don't remember that. Maybe that was just a piece of what went on with *Challenger* that I wasn't personally involved with. But there was a tremendous amount of support that reached out to—and maybe it was because they felt they didn't lend the right level of support to the *Challenger* families. I don't know. I don't know why there seemed to be this, "Let's make sure we protect the families. Let's make sure we reach out." I mean, they had a whole committee, a whole Tiger Team, called *Columbia* Families First. I mean, it was established like that day, that Saturday. But, yes, a lot of things changed after that.

WRIGHT: Were you involved directly in any of the activities?

SOPER: Just in setting up meetings and stuff like that, arranging trips. I wasn't on the team or anything like that. That was what I wanted to do.

WRIGHT: Before we end today's session, I wanted to ask if you would share with me how your role did change and how it evolved over those years.

SOPER: Okay, well, as I stated before, I kind of started out in a role of what I would call an executive secretary. That was probably in the sixties and seventies. That evolved into more of a staff support role, which I would liken to "horse holder" role, somebody that's always there, kind of helping to do whatever the boss needs done, and I evolved into that during the eighties when Mr. Beggs was the Administrator. Then after Mr. Beggs' tour ended and we evolved into the

next wave of Administrators, I would say my role evolved more into office manager and protocol officer for the Administrator's immediate office.

From that point, I'd say that would bring me through the nineties on up to 2000 and the early years of this new century. We had so many organizational changes that there became a more frequent need for someone on the staff to be the interpreter of methods and processes, because everything was changing. Not only was management changing, not only were the political influences changing, the technology was changing. Along about Y2K, everything just started becoming so different in the way all businesses operated, not just NASA. So that had an impact on what I was doing there and what value could I add.

All of these new people that come in, all have their own trusted folks that they either bring with them or that they work with over the years or that they already know. But they all need some continuity, and I sort of evolved into the continuity point for the Office of the Administrator, and that's where I see myself having ended up. I got more increased responsibility for kind of training the new people, especially people that were new to government, because not only did they not know the agency, they didn't know the government processes. You know, training them in the specific language or culture of NASA and helping them to know the right place to go and where to start and that kind of stuff.

I kiddingly say I ended up becoming a drill sergeant or a den mother, but those were the kinds of things that I think the office needed while it was always in this steady state of change. You have to have some stability in any organization, and so no matter what the changes were, I always managed to be the one that just was still there, you know, I guess because I had a position that wasn't threatening to anybody. It was more a support type role, as opposed to a managerial

or a policy-making type role. So when you're not a threat, people come to rely on you for guidance or whatever. So that's sort of where I ended up.

On a broader level I'd say I ended up becoming the one person on the staff that could help them develop a business process for how to run the office and how to get this done and that sort of thing. You know, how do we go about finding the right kind of help? Where do we go to draw upon? Is there any talent internal, or do we need to bring somebody in from outside to do that? Because I had been there for so long and could say, "Well, you know, what you really need, you need somebody that can do this for you. That's a full-time job. Handling the Administrator's trips is a full-time job, so you need a person to do that." So the role over the years evolved into sort of a resident consultant— I guess is a way of putting it.

But I never really went out and looked for the opportunity to move into any kind of management position, and the reason why I didn't is probably twofold. One, I liked what I was doing, and there was enough change in the kind of job I already had that it was never the same thing, so it certainly didn't become routine in any m____, shape, or form. So there was always a challenge there, right there to begin with.

Secondly, in the way NASA has always worked, you have to move around. I go back to the advice that I got from Mr. Allnutt, which was not necessarily advice so much as a statement of fact. I haven't been willing to move around. I didn't want to go take a year assignment at Kennedy or go work in Houston or go to two or three of the field centers and then come back to Headquarters so that I could come back as an SES or a manager. I felt that I was making a useful contribution to the mission and the program right where I was, so I didn't really go out and search for it.

Quite honestly, I think if you're doing a decent job—if you're not doing a decent job, you don't have it for very long, because they find a way to get rid of you, okay? So the fact that nobody ever wanted to get rid of me told me that I must be doing a decent job. That was one contributing factor.

The second factor is the fact that you can be an influence doing what you're doing, if you do it.. You can be influential, sometimes you can be just as influential or more influential, if not everyone is aware of your influence. I have always felt that I must be contributing something or I wouldn't still be doing what I'm doing, or I wouldn't have taken on some of these new challenges, like people coming to me and saying, "Okay, how am I going to do this?"

I mean, these are people that are smart and are educated and are making a whole lot more money than I do, but they're coming to me, looking for me to work with them to help put them on the right track. To me, that's a compliment, so I haven't felt that I needed to reach out for anything beyond that. I've been gratified and satisfied with what I've been doing, other than the fact that sometimes it gets a little strenuous, and I'm glad I'm retired. [Laughs] I'm looking forward to that.

One of the other things that you had asked about in your list of topics, and I do want to have just a minute to expound on this, was whether or not the evolution of technology has impacted my day-to-day job, and specifically what changes imposed the greatest impact. I would have to say the Internet, first and foremost, and secondly, the arrival of wireless communication, because now that everybody is available 24/7, they're never off the clock, ever. You can reach anybody you want to reach now, no matter where they are and no matter what time of the day it is.

That's a tremendous change from the way it used to be, and it's a very significant change. It's very stressful. It puts people on call all the time, and that's made a very, very big difference in the way people do their job and the way they live their lives. They're always connected. I mean, IT support people send me e-mail messages on the weekend, and I write back to them and say, "What are you doing? It's Saturday night at eight o'clock."

"Well, I was on my Blackberry, and I saw the e-mail that you sent me," blah, blah, blah.

That's made work very, very hard. It really has, for a lot of people.

WRIGHT: It never ends.

SOPER: It never ends. It just never ends. That's a big difference in the world today, at least it is as far—I'm not saying it's bad. I'm just saying that is a significant impact on the workforce today. The Internet and all this wireless capability makes it very, very strenuous for people.

WRIGHT: A long way from the typewriter and walking three doors down to—

SOPER: Make a copy. Yes, it really is. It's a long way from that.

WRIGHT: Now, you've met so many people. You worked for so many people. Do you have some thoughts about—you mentioned something a while ago about heroes or—

SOPER: Oh, god, I started to make a list of heroes, and then I just got tired and had to quit, because I've pretty much have told you the ones that I personally hold in such high esteem as

we've gone through this dialogue today, but NASA's got great history and it's got great heroes. There are so many people. It's such a privilege to be associated with a program like this, because it just generates such strength and such love and such enthusiasm among so many people.

I just recently went to the screening of the IMAX film on the Mars rover. I took my husband to that, and if I'm a space cadet, he's an anti-space cadet. He's never had an active part in my job. He's supported me from the sidelines, but he is not a space cadet; doesn't know a whole lot about the program. His one biggest regret is that he never got to go down with me to see a launch. But I was always working, and when you bring a spouse and you're working, it's not fun for the spouse, and I knew that.

But he and I went to see this Mars rover IMAX film, and I was just absolutely enthralled by what those people at JPL [Jet Propulsion Laboratory, Pasadena, California] went through to create these robots, the amount of time and the obstacles that they had to deal with. I stand back away from something like that, and I think, "Oh, my god, I work in this place." This was the better part of my adult life, and I didn't know— I'm pushing papers around, and I'm washing dishes and serving vodka to the Russians. And these people are doing this hands-on stuff that's just amazing.

You stand back away from it, and you say, "But that's okay. We all have a little piece, and whatever it is we're doing all makes up the total picture." So I have a right to be proud of the tiny, little piece that I've had in this over these years, just not to the degree that these rocket scientists do, but at least to some degree. It's an amazing, amazing program. It's unique, and there's never going to be another thing in the federal government like NASA, ever.

WRIGHT: And it reaches out to international partners.

SOPER: Yes, and now to the world. We've sparked this interest all over the globe. The Chinese are moving right down the road. Well, somebody had to spark that interest. Where do you think they got it? They got it from watching us. It's not just a job. It's a passion. It's a passion and it's a mission, and any association with it is a source of such pride that I couldn't imagine working anyplace else.

WRIGHT: Why did you opt to leave when you did?

SOPER: For a lot of reasons. I'm getting tired physically, and I didn't want to just go work in an office where it was more routine and nine to five, because when you've been in the high visible jobs that I've been in, it's hard to go backwards. And my husband just retired, and I don't want to wait until I'm—it just seemed like the right thing to do at the right time. I had thought last year at this time, if you'd have asked me how much longer I was going to work, I would have said, "Oh, probably till the end of this administration [2008]. I don't think I want to go through another change in administration." Because we had just gotten a new team in, and I figured, "This group is going to be here until President [George W.] Bush is out of office," okay, if you look at the way things work in Washington. That's what I would have told you last April at this time.

But then the end of the year, they came out with another buyout opportunity, and my husband had retired in October, and I thought, "Okay, I'm not going to go get another job within NASA so that I can make more money," because I'm not going to do that right now when I'm

this close to retirement. So therefore, look at it in pure dollars and cents. At this point in my career, unless I got a promotion, it would not impact my annuity, okay? So I'm not going to go seek another job so I can get a promotion just to work a couple more years. I've already reached the peak in my retirement program, in the civil service retirement program, forty-one years and eleven months. If you've worked forty-one years and eleven months, you're going to get 80 percent of your high three, no matter who you are or what you make, period. It's sheer economics. When they offered the buyout, and the fact that Charles had just retired, I thought, "That's a sign that maybe now is the time for me to go do this."

There are things I want to do. I want to help Diane do her thesis, do research for her thesis. I want to catch up on my reading. I can't do this and work five days a week, twelve hours a day, at my age. I'm slowing down. I can't work that pace. All the people that I work with are considerably younger than me, considerably, and I did it when I was their age, but I'm just slowing down. I'm just flat out slowing down. I don't want to stop, because I don't want to get stagnant. I will probably end up looking for something to do on a part-time basis after I've gotten past the retirement honeymoon.

But, I've learned some things, and that's what I want to share with you.

Because these are the kind of things that you don't have when you come right out of college, no matter how many degrees you have. You get them by experience. I think they're valuable, and they'll be with me until I die, whether I use them in a job or I just use them in my life.

Patience, I've learned. Humility. Accountability. Perseverance. And I've learned how to accept change, which nobody likes, myself at the top of the list. Because just because everything is different doesn't mean that anything has changed, but you have to go with the flow.

The biggest thing I learned is an ethical thing, and that is that if it won't look bad in the *Washington Post*, then it's probably okay to do. And that's it. I mean, those are just things that over the years that I've learned because of my job, and I think that those are things that you have with you for the rest of your life, and you keep, and you use, and you help and share with other people. You try to get other people to understand that sometimes you just have to wait.

You're not going to learn that overnight. It takes a couple of turns around the block before you realize how important it is to be dependable and how important it is to be accountable for what it is you're doing, and that's why people depend on you and they trust you. NASA's a great place to learn those life lessons; at least it has been for me. Some people are never going to learn them, no matter who they work for, but I think it's because they don't want to.

WRIGHT: Those are valuable thoughts that we can take with us.

SOPER: The only other thing that I think we didn't cover, that I don't know whether you want to go back to or not, is the women's role in the workplace.

WRIGHT: Yes. Is that something you'd like to share, or that's something you've watched change over the years?

SOPER: Oh, I've certainly watched it change, and I think it's still changing. We have, for the first time in NASA's almost fifty-year history, a female Deputy Administrator [Shana Dale]. I don't know her real well. She's only been there a couple of months. I think that she's a definite

indication that women have not really broken through what they call the "glass ceiling" yet, because people treat her differently because she's a woman.

WRIGHT: Can you give me a couple of examples?

SOPER: Well, I think they're more guarded as to what they say. Now, I don't know, because I haven't sat in any of the meetings that she's chaired. I don't know what the reaction is to her. I'm just talking about the day-to-day—she's exhibited a couple of idiosyncrasies, personal idiosyncrasies, that have drawn a great deal of conversation among the working troops. Those idiosyncrasies are no different from some of her male counterparts, okay? But because, I think, they're coming from her, I think they're more subject to scrutiny. I'm not talking in circles; I just don't want to get into the nitty-gritty of the details. It's no different than some of the men that have sat where she's sat have done, but it seems to be drawing a lot more conversation from the workforce, and I think that's because she's a woman.

WRIGHT: How do you feel that a woman's role is perceived at Headquarters? You've watched over this last forty years. As you mentioned, you came in as a secretary. Was it a while before you saw women being promoted into manager and—

SOPER: No. No. When I worked in Legislative Affairs in the seventies, one of the Deputies was—and I worked for her—was a female. NASA, I think, has always been very on the cutting edge as far as offering opportunities, management opportunities, to women.

WRIGHT: You worked on the Federal Women's Program Committee. Was that part of anything that—

SOPER: I joined it one year and then found that I never had time to go to any of the meetings, so I didn't get involved. I also joined Women in Aerospace, and I went to a couple of meetings. That's one of the disadvantages of giving all your energy to your job. You miss a lot of the side things. I tried going to school at night, but, of course, that was when my son was little. I guess I just didn't have the drive or the goals to push myself, to make myself keep up with all of that. In order to push yourself to do all of those things, you have to really be goal oriented, and I guess my goals just weren't that strong.

I remember when Dr. [Shannon W.] Lucid came to Headquarters as the Chief Scientist. I did not know her, but at that time Chief Scientist was on the immediate staff of the Office of the Administrator, so she was one of my children. I call them all my children. That woman was amazing. She went home. She never actually moved here and didn't move her family. She commuted between here and Houston for almost three years. I don't know how she did it. One day I was down there for something in her office, and I said, "How do you do it?"

She said, "I don't know." She said, "I want to be with my family on the weekends, so I do it." She said, "It's the same thing when I was on the [Mir] Space Station. I wanted to be there, so I just did it."

I thought to myself, "That's—." I mean, I could no more imagine being in that environment for six months, however long she was there. I don't have the drive or the stamina or the whatever it takes to do that. I can't be without my creature comforts. There are certain things I can push myself to do, and certain things I can't.

I said to her, "I just think you're amazing for doing that," especially at the age at which she did it. She was in her late forties or early fifties. I said, "I just think that's amazing." And I feel that way. I mean, I think it's wonderful that she can be that driven and that dedicated. I'm going to withhold judgment on my comment on women until I see whether or not we have a female nominee for President in '08, in '07.

WRIGHT: Okay. That'll give us an excuse to talk again.

SOPER: Yes, because that's where I think we're headed. I think it's about damn time that women got a chance to do anything they darn well please, because there shouldn't be, "Well, I'm better at this, or you're better at that," because of the difference between men and women. No. It's what up here that counts. [Gestures to head] It's what you want to do. It's what you're driven to do, what your goals are. You can be anything you want to be. I think NASA has been, from what I've seen, very, very, very good for women to have the opportunities that are—I haven't seen any discrimination against women, from where I sit.

One of the women that I know and is a longtime associate is now the Assistant Administrator for Appropriations. Her name is Mary Dee Kerwin. Mary Dee started working at NASA when she was in college. She worked two summers as an intern, clerk-typist. I was in the Office of Legislative Affairs. She's about maybe five or six years younger than me, so she's in her mid-fifties. She's a NASA SES-er. She's *th*e resident expert on the appropriations process for NASA. She's smart. It took her a long time to get there. It didn't happen overnight, okay? But she's there. I mean, Administrators come and go, and Mary Dee is the only one that

understands the appropriations process for NASA, you know, how we get our bill passed by the Appropriations Committee. She understands it and knows what we do and how we do it.

WRIGHT: Very important to the entire agency.

SOPER: And they listen to her. So, to me, that's an indication that there are a lot of women that have been given a lot of good opportunities at NASA. Some haven't done well, but I think, there again, that's a personality thing. If it's a bad match with your manager in any job, it doesn't matter whether you're wearing a skirt or—you know. I never felt that being a woman held me back. But there, again, I didn't aspire to lofty heights. I was happy doing what I was doing. Maybe I didn't represent any threat to anybody, and other women have, and that's why they've been stunted. I don't know. You know, if you're a threat, it doesn't matter whether you're a man or a woman, you're a threat. That comes into play in people's jockeying for positions or power. There's no getting around that. It does. I know a lot of really smart women, and I have as much respect for them as I do the smart men I know.

WRIGHT: Well, I really appreciate all the words of experience and information that you've given us today and all the insight that only you can have after forty-three years.

SOPER: Well, I don't know if I've told you anything you didn't already know.

WRIGHT: Lots and lots and lots.

SOPER: I hope it's of some value.

WRIGHT: It is of value, and your service, especially, so thanks again.

SOPER: Thank you. I feel very special in being given the opportunity to participate in this.

WRIGHT: Well, I can truly say you're one of a kind, so we're really glad that you were able to sit down and talk.

SOPER: Well, that's what I'm saying. I mean, I didn't know anything about it until Courtney said something to me about it.

WRIGHT: Well, we'll have to tell him thank you, so we got some good stuff from you.

SOPER: Well, he called me the other day, and he wanted to be sure that he hadn't lost touch with me, because he hadn't heard from me. I said, "You haven't lost touch with me. I've got your e-mail. I just haven't have time," I said, "and I'm busy getting ready for this oral history thing that you got me into, Courtney."

He said, "Oh, that's great. That's fabulous." [Laughter]

WRIGHT: Yes. I'll have to tell him thank you, too.

SOPER: He and Scott Pace both said something to me about it, and then I found out in talking to Joe Allen that he had also—I knew the program was out there, but I just, again, had never had the luxury of time to get on the website and see what was on there and who had participated in it. Of course, now that I understand it, I'm going to be out there selling it.

But I'm going to have to find you a financial backer, I guess. [Laughter]

WRIGHT: Well, we hope not.

SOPER: I hope not.

[End of interview]