

Former MSFC Directors' Secretaries Group Oral Interviews

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Beth: I've had the most fun getting all of you all together and getting to know on the telephone Bonnie, whom I did not know, and then all the rest of you whom I have not seen in forever. It has been so much fun trying to get us all together. And I think that the way we want to start is starting with Bonnie and then to Gertrude. And do you all know how you came in the flow of things? And tell a little bit about yourself; you'll introduce yourself and who you worked for. And then I'm told we're just going to sit around and talk like we were sitting around drinking iced tea and eating ... what? ... cucumber sandwiches or something. So we'll sit around and do that then for a little while. So Bonnie, if you'd like to start.

Bonnie: Well, I'm **Bonnie Holmes**. I worked for three Center Directors: Dr. Wernher von Braun, Dr. Eberhard Rees, and Dr. Rocco Petrone. I was working with Dr. von Braun in the Guided Missile Development Division, Department of the Army, before we became NASA. So I worked for him for 18 years until he went to Washington. Dr. Rees was his successor so I worked with Dr. Rees until he retired. And then Dr. Petrone came during the Skylab days. I was his secretary until he went back to the Cape. I lived in [pause] ... I was born over at Lacey's Springs. I was working in Columbus, Georgia, when I decided to apply to come to Huntsville, and that was the greatest decision I ever made.

Beth: So, you were a charter member? Of NASA.

Bonnie: Of NASA, yes.

Gertrude: I'm **Gertrude Conard**. I worked for Dr. William R. Lucas many, many years. I started working for the Army in Civil Service in 1954. I worked when the line was still in operation. You remember that they had ammunition out there. I worked in an ammunition area. And I came from there to Marshall and was interviewed by Kingsbury. Kingsbury was filling in for Dr. Lucas that day and he hired me. I didn't know whether I really had a job or whether he was going to accept me when he came back off of leave or not. But anyway he did, and I worked for him for many years. We started over at the Structures and Development Laboratory later but we were in Materials first. We went through the gamut. He came all the way up to Director finally, and I came along with him all the way. So I could tell you each step that we took as we came up the ladder. It's been exciting.

Evelyn: I'm **Evelyn Staples**. I went to the Director's Office in 1983 as a second secretary in Dr. Lucas' office, in the same office with Gertrude for 3 years. After the Challenger accident and J. R. Thompson returned to Marshall to be the Center Director, I became his secretary. He didn't actually hire me; he just inherited me. I worked there for 3 years until he was appointed Deputy Administrator of NASA, at which time I transferred to NASA Headquarters. I was secretary to him up there. I came to Huntsville ... I followed my husband, who was transferred with the Apollo Program back early. My time at Marshall

was primarily in the Spacehab? Spacelab?, no, Spacehab Program Office in the Science and Engineering Directorate. It's been a great ride. I'm loving it. For somebody that learned to type on a manual typewriter, I'm appreciative of the computer age. So it's been great.

Sandra: I'm **Sandra Turner**. I worked for Jack Lee that was Center Director from '89 until '93. I worked for him until about the last 18 months of that time. I actually began working for him when he was Acting Manager of the Special Projects Office where I was working in the front office at that time. He was wearing a second hat. I think at the time he actually was the Deputy Director to Dr. Lucas. Anyway this was an additional duty that he was given. This was often the case when they needed someone to fill those shoes when someone had retired. That was my first encounter with him. Later I became his secretary. His secretary was Jackie LeMay at the time. I considered her one of my mentors. She moved on and progressed out of the secretarial field. He selected me to be his secretary. I was his secretary as Deputy Director for quite some time, but I guess a total of 8 years I worked for him. And I, of course, have many fond memories of working with Gertrude, Evelyn, Beth, Jerry Ann, and Joann. We all worked closely together. When you're in that kind of environment, you become very close. You share a lot of things; you bond very much.

I didn't come to Huntsville; I was born here. My husband and I both are native Huntsvillians. It was just sort of a natural thing that when you graduate from high school or college or whatever, you go to work in the space program or the defense program. At the time I had graduated from high school here and knew many of Dr. von Braun and his compatriots' children went to school with them. The environment was just such that it was exciting and that was the thing to do. I actually started to work, as did Bonnie and Gertrude, with the Guided Missile Development Division. At that time I worked in one of the labs, the Fabrication Lab, for a guy named Max Levictorholt?. Later I decided to leave and go to college for a year in Tuscaloosa. I departed thinking I might pursue something else. I returned on temporary appointment because I planned to go back, and about that time I fell in love and got married and decided to stay. My husband was involved. He worked for Thiokol as a (?) engineer, and Boeing as well. So he was involved somewhat with the Saturn V Program when he worked for Boeing. Our lives were sort of focused around ... not necessarily focused but very much were impacted by the space program. You just sort of come to eat, sleep, and breathe it. I decided I didn't want to pursue anything else. I stayed there until my first child was born and left to raise a family. When I got them into high school I decided I wanted to try to go back and see if there was something I could do with NASA. I did return. The only thing that was open was a temporary appointment; that was only because I had not already gotten my career conditional appointment. I hired on as a GS-1 and then later got my permanent appointment. That's when I was working in the Special Projects Office and then progressed on to be the Center Director's secretary, and I enjoyed every minute of it. I wouldn't take anything for the memories that we all have of those times. We were all part of making history.

Joann: I'm **Joann DeGroff**. I was secretary to Mr. Lee, Jack Lee, from 1992 to 1994 when he left and went to Washington to be, I guess it was, Assistant Administrator for Mr. Goldin, who had become the chief at that time. I started out at Redstone Arsenal in 1956. I grew up in the county, out in Madison County. We had a shorthand and a typing teacher. Her main goal was to teach all the girls how to get

out of the cotton field. I was raised on a farm. She made sure she taught us how to type and take shorthand and everything. I went to work at Redstone as a GS-2. I worked there for a few years; so I started having my family and started staying home. Then I came to work for Marshall Space Flight Center in early 1970s. I worked 12 years on the Shuttle Task Team. My last boss at Shuttle was James Odom (Jim Odom). When he went to head up the Hubble Space Telescope Program, he took me along. We stayed there for a while and got that going really good, got it on the right track. Then they moved him up to S&E [Science and Engineering] to take Mr. Kingsbury's place when Mr. Kingsbury retired, Chief of S&E. I went with him there. Then Mr. Odom was pulled to go to Washington to head up the Space Station Program in Washington. Dr. Littles was his deputy; he became the Chief of S&E, and I became Dr. Littles' secretary. Then Dr. Littles was selected as the Deputy Director when Mr. Lee became the Director. I moved down to the Deputy Director's office with Dr. Littles. Then when Sandra took her job in the Protocol Office, Mr. Lee needed a new secretary, and I was selected to be his new secretary. I worked for him for 2 years before he went to Washington. That was in 1994. It was a good time for me to retire, so that's when I retired. I feel so lucky to have worked, you know, to have been able to have a job like we had. We were all so lucky.

Jerry Ann: My name is **Jerry Ann Ise**. I was born and raised here in Huntsville, Alabama, a native like Sandra. The space program has always been there; it gets in your blood. You just live it. I started to work at ABMA [Army Ballistic Missile Agency] in 1956 out of high school. I was like Joann, I had a teacher that believed in typing and shorthand. I came to work at ABMA and I worked there for 4 years and during that time I met my husband. In 1960 we married, and he went to Purdue University to get a Master's degree. I resigned from ABMA, but I had transferred over to NASA in 1960 in August or July, whenever they transferred. When we came back from Purdue, I didn't go back to work until after my youngest child was 12 years old, so I had about a 16-year sabbatical in there. Then when he was in the sixth grade, I went back to work in 1981. I went to work in the Shuttle Projects Office, External Tank Office. There I worked with Joann and learned how to do the work all over again. I went to work as a GS-2 in 1956 and came back to work as a GS-3 in 1981. [laughs] I didn't progress much. I worked in the Shuttle Projects Office, in External Tank. Then I worked for Porter Bridwell, in the External Tank Project Office. I worked for Ron Abraham down in the branch office. Then when Joann left, there was another lady that came in; she stayed for a while. She moved on to bigger and better things, and then I came in to be Porter's secretary. When he moved up to be the Manager of Shuttle Projects, I went with him. Then when he was over in HLLV [Heavy Lift Launch Vehicle] and all these different places, he started taking me with him because I knew what he liked and the way he wanted it done. His people that worked for him, all his managers, got to the point where they trusted me to slip tidbits of information to him that they wanted him to have. We had a really good working relationship. I retired then in 1998. I was quite ill at that time, and it was time to go. So I have had a wonderful life there. I count those days as my glorious days. I laugh and say well, I had 20 years of growing up, I had 20 years of children, and I had 20 years of work. Really I think it has been wonderful. Now I'm ready for 20 years of fun.

Beth: A different kind of fun than what we had.

Beth: I'm **Beth Partain**. I'm from Hackleburg, Alabama, originally. I know several of you have heard this story before, but I never, ever thought that a little girl from Hackleburg, Alabama, would wind up working for NASA. I didn't know what NASA was when I came over for my interview. Dr. Stuhlinger hired me as the second girl in his office in 1963. Gradine Simpson was his secretary. He would always for years ... the last time I saw Dr. Stuhlinger ... would tell the story that he looked up and saw a Personnel lady coming down the hall holding this little girl by her hand and her mother following right along behind. Well, it wasn't my mother; it was my grandmother. I know she drove over here from Hackleburg with me for the interview. For him to know that, she must have come in for the interview, but I don't remember that part of it. I was very protected when I was growing up in Hackleburg.

I started out in the Research Projects Office and then worked in different offices in Research Projects and thoroughly enjoyed every one. Those crazy scientists; they were a breed unto themselves. I stayed long enough to get my career appointment. Then I went home and stayed 8 years with two babies. I had my son, and he was the main reason I decided: "I want to come back to work or I'm going to have to kill somebody" – much as I love him to this day! I came back into the Shuttle Office. Now I didn't think that I would ever love anybody or any work as much as I loved Research Projects. But the Shuttle people were wonderful. I started out in Program Control and then worked my way up into working for the Deputy Director for Shuttle, first for Ellery May. He retired and then for Jud Lovingood. I was in the office with Bob Lindstrom and Marie Gray, and you talk about fine, fine people to learn from. The stories I could tell about J. R. Thompson and Jim Odom, I won't. Bob Lindstrom, J. R. Thompson, George Hardy, and Jim Odom – they were marvelous. From there I went down to the Cape for 3 or 4 years and wound up in the Inspector General's Office, which was interesting and fun because I did meet some fine people. But you knew when the phone rang or the door opened, they were coming in to complain about Marshall, about NASA; and, of course, I didn't like that at all. I came back to Huntsville, back to Marshall in 1986, the summer after Challenger.

Back up to Challenger, I was fortunate enough while I was down at the Cape to be one of the hostesses for Dick Smith, who was the Center Director. I was up on the roof of the LCC when Challenger exploded. That was, I guess, the worst memory that I have of working for NASA and things that went on after that. It's something you hear and relive all the time. I remember I was holding Dr. Phil Culbertson's grandson's hand and was explaining to him in my terms as best I could what was happening. I saw something different up in the sky, but, like everybody else, it didn't register on me for the longest time. Then I heard somebody in the crowd yell, "Hold it, Scobee, hold it; hold it, Scobee, hold it." There were some family members over on the other side; we were separated by a rope. I heard a scream come from over there that for months and months, every time I closed my eyes, I would see this explosion in this brilliant blue sky and hear this scream that just came from their toes. Almost as a body – we'd all been told RTLS, Return to Launch Site – those of us who worked for NASA turned to look. They were going to come back to the landing site; we just knew they were. Here [pointing to head] we knew they weren't, but here [pointing to heart] we just knew they were. It fell forever and forever. They had to let the family members go off the roof first and hold us up there. There was not a dry eye or a sane person on top of that building that day. That was the last time they let people view from the roof of the LCC. It was a wonderful experience except for the last time that I was up there.

Mary Cooper (Mary Bonner) called me and said, “Beth, do you want to come back to Marshall?” I said, “I sure do.” I was driving in for my interview on the 9th floor when it was announced that J. R. was coming back as Center Director. That made me want to come back to Marshall all that much more. He reported just a few days before I did. He got the place ready for me when I came. [laughs] I worked for Ted Carey on the Executive Staff; then he left. I worked for JD Horne. Then Mr. Bethay’s (Woody Bethay’s) secretary moved to Birmingham, and I was fortunate enough to get to go to work for him. I would not have thought this -- and I would not tell this if I had not already told Mr. Bethay this. Mr. Bethay was the one who kept Bob Lindstrom, and Jim Odom and J. R. Thompson and George Hardy from doing what they wanted to do all the time. You know he had a reputation; you’re all aware of that. I did not realize the responsibility that man had until I spent 2 years working outside his ..., in his area but not for him. Then I went to work for him. The finest man; he has Marshall running in his veins. I understood why he did what ... the decisions that he made. He taught me more and gave me more responsibility. Then Joann left Dr. Littles to work for Jack Lee. Mary Copper again said, “Would you like to go to work for Dr. Littles?” Well, I didn’t want to leave Mr. Bethay, but she convinced me that was what I needed to do. So I worked for Dr. Littles as Deputy until he went to Washington as AA. Then I went to work in Transportation for a few months, and then Dr. Littles came back to Marshall as Director. Mary again called and said, “Would you like to come back to work for Dr. Littles?” I said, “You bet your sweet bippie.” So I was fortunate enough to do that. Then I stayed on after he retired to work for Art Stephenson for a couple of years too. So that’s my long story about how I got here. Every minute – well take out the calendars and the telephone -- ... [pause]

Jerry Ann: Let’s don’t talk about the calendars.

[At this point a general discussion ensues about calendars.]

Sandra: Those 24-hour day calendars.

Bonnie: A nightmare every day -- Dr. von Braun’s calendar.

Sandra: I can’t imagine what it was then. I know what it was like when I was there.

Bonnie: We always tried to get one more appointment in. Every morning when he’d come in, he’d dump his briefcase on my desk, empty it out all over my desk, everything he’d written to me to take care of that day. Then we’d talk about calendar. It was a challenge to keep all the appointments going. I had a lot of people that got very irritated at me for going in and interrupting a meeting: “Dr. von Braun, you’ve got ten people waiting out here.” And they weren’t finished with him. I got fussed at a few times for breaking up a meeting.

Beth: And were you ever accused of not wanting to put somebody in to see him? To see the Center Director?

Bonnie: Yes. [Others nod in agreement.]

Beth: And it wasn't that you didn't want to. You couldn't find

Bonnie: Are you really trying?

Beth: Are you really trying? Well, doesn't he have just 5 minutes?

Sandra: I mean really! [facetiously] He can do without lunch, or come in earlier to see me.

Joann: Mr. Odom had a saying that I thought fit that job so well. He said, "It's like drinking water from a fire hose." And that's the way it was. Every day it was coming at you all at one time.

Sandra: And the changes, of course. When Headquarters would call, then the whole calendar would change for the entire day, or the week, or whatever; and you had all these meetings to move.

Beth: And it changed everybody else's calendar down the line.

Sandra: You had all these people you were making unhappy.

Beth: And they were holding you responsible.

Sandra: Often I felt like a dart board with people throwing darts at it. They could get so upset. They just didn't understand the environment; if you've never worked in that area, you really have no idea.

Gertrude: We had some very interesting visitors though. One in particular that I enjoyed was Lady Bird Johnson. She came and visited Materials Lab when I was down there. I got the joy, I guess you would call it, of getting them to clean up the restrooms and clean up the director's office so that it was presentable so that she and her assistant, Liz Carpenter – remember her. They came and they enjoyed the Materials Lab very much. They toured all over, and I got to serve them cookies and coffee on my good china that I brought from home. They seemed to enjoy themselves very much. That was one incident that I really enjoyed. It was a plus.

Bonnie: I liked Walt Disney. [To Gertrude] Were you there when Walt Disney came?

Gertrude: Yes.

Sandra: I guess the most important visitor that we had was President Bush, the first President Bush.

Several: And John Denver. Oh, I remember John Denver.

Bonnie: John Denver was a very ... one of the biggest space fans. I met him first down at the Cape one day. He was down there for a launch.

Gertrude: He came and visited our [MSFC] picnic and brought his son, his adopted son, with him. That was very interesting, quite a shock.

Joann: He was at the picnic; is that what you're saying?

Gertrude: Yes.

Sandra: He came to speak to the Forum, the Von Braun Forum later.

Evelyn: Gertrude and I had some interesting guests, uninvited guests. One who wanted to be a Martian astronaut.

Gertrude: She came every day for about 3 weeks. She would call her son and tell him where she was and that she was trying to get an interview with Dr. Lucas. That was one I just gave. That was really a hardship because it was hard to tell her every day and to look at her book and realize that she wanted to see him. She really was sincere. She had seen these Martians and she wanted to tell him about it, and he needed to know it. This was something that ... I was telling her, "No, no; I'm sorry, but he's busy and he can't see you." She never did see him.

Sandra: Do you all remember the man that showed up and said that he was to be the next Center Director?

Several: [Nodding in agreement] or "I've heard that story."

Evelyn: He came up on the front of the [Building] 4200. He was trying to come up the steps in his automobile.

Joann: He was from The Netherlands, wasn't he? He was in the conference they were having downtown at the Von Braun Civic Center. It was in the interim; we didn't have a Center Director. It was before Mr. Thompson came. He came into the lobby; somebody called Brad [Garland] of Security.

Sandra: I think that was Leroy [Leroy Osborn of the Executive Staff].

Joann: Well, he fired Brad. He fired two or three more people. I guess they kept him from coming to the 9th floor.

Several: Yes, they did. But several did.

Gertrude: We had several up there.

Evelyn: The “Martian astronaut” and quite a nice looking young man from Nashville with a leather briefcase.

Gertrude: We had one that worked out there who used to come in and want to see Dr. Lucas. He was really having problems mentally. I finally got hold of his supervisor and found out what the problem was. He many times would sit at my desk and waited to see Lucas; he never got to see him.

Joann: The man from The Netherlands, they called his family and they found out that he was off his medication. He suffered from delusions of grandeur, and he had gotten off his medication.

Beth: Evelyn, I think you were there with J. R., speaking of Leroy again; but a pastor, a female pastor, got up to the 9th floor and pinched him on the butt. Remember that? Pinched Leroy on the butt standing there in the elevator lobby! It just tore Leroy up. He was just beside himself. [general laughter]

Jerry Ann: Let me ask you, do ya’ll remember the little button underneath the desk that you set off so many times. That you would accidentally touch. Here would come Brad: “Is everything okay”?

Joann: I would be just busy and I’d look up and there would be Brad. I didn’t realize that I

Beth: I’d say, “Did you have an appointment?”

Sandra: Or he says, “You rang.”

Jerry Ann: It was something for emergencies.

Gertrude: Because we’d had a lot of emergencies and we couldn’t get hold of them [Security].

Beth: Well, they were good. They were always there.

Joann: There was one time that there was a man – I think he was probably a little deranged or something. He had worked at NASA and he was threatening to kill Mr. Bethay and some other people. And they [Security] gave us his picture, didn’t they? They had a picture that we had to keep on hand. That was one of the times when Brad – I think I accidently hit the button -- and he really came up there in a hurry.

Beth: They were good.

Jerry Ann: [Shaking her head] I hit that button so many times. It was awful.

Bonnie: But it was fortunate you had a button. We didn’t have anything. Everything was personal.

Beth: I think that happened after the Netherlands guy and the new Center Director came on board. I think that happened after that to try to keep them off the 9th floor.

Evelyn and Gertrude: We had a button.

Sandra: I did too, and ya'll preceded me. Well, do you all feel like working in these jobs as Center Director's secretaries that you really were able to grow and stretch?

All: Oh, yes.

Bonnie: it was an education, for me.

Gertrude: I came here with UAH for 2 years. So I went to school while I was doing 10 hours at Marshall for 2 years. Finally the doctor said you've got to give up one or the other. So that's when I gave up UAH, but I enjoyed it. I enjoyed both.

Sandra: I did some of my classwork here at UAH too but not while I was working as secretary to the Center Director. I could not handle it; that was a 24-hour-a-day job.

Joann (and others): I loved the job, but it was something else.

Sandra: It was very demanding.

Bonnie: It was a very demanding job, but it was very rewarding.

Beth: I think it's the most rewarding job on the Center.

Sandra: I don't think that ... Jack Lee that I worked for was not a demanding person. He was very demanding of himself, but he was not demanding of other people. But somehow you sensed that demand. And you set that example by being so dedicated. Working 24 hours a day, then you just fell right into it. That is just what you do; that was your life. Evelyn and I discussed that many times. She would wrap Christmas presents on the way to her home on Christmas Eve in the car because we had been tied up on Christmas Eve until the ninth hour.

All: We had Christmas parties. [general murmuring about Christmas parties]

Beth: Oh, Evelyn, do you remember that first one that we had? J. R. Let's just give a party. [rolling her eyes in incredulity]

Evelyn: And where's the Christmas tree?

Beth: And how are we going to get food?

All: [General laughter] **Sandra:** All together, of course.

Beth: Let's invite the whole Center. And so what are you girls going to do about all the food?

Gertrude: Remember he called all of us into his office. He said, "Let's have a party." And we said, "What do you want?" And he said, "Let's have all the works."

Evelyn: All the people. And they came! Everybody came.

Jerry Ann: It was a wonderful tradition.

Beth (and All reiterate): It was a wonderful tradition.

Evelyn: And he was Santa Claus, for several years; I guess every year. Then when we went to NASA Headquarters, we had a Christmas party, of course. They wanted, and I volunteered, for him to be Santa Claus. He had a young male assistant. I went over to the Headquarters building to the party and sat in there. He [J. R.] had his pipe – at that time you could smoke – and he set the fur on his beard on fire. He said, "Don't you ever volunteer me to be Santa again!" So I never did. But their parties at Headquarters were not like Marshall parties.

Gertrude: They weren't as much fun?

Evelyn: No. They left something to be desired.

Beth: Well, he started a great tradition.

Gertrude: We had a lot of fun at Christmas.

Beth and All: Yes, it was. It was a lot of work for us.

Sandra: We carried on after he left.

Jerry Ann: It did a lot of good.

Joann: The food that was left over we would donate it to charity. I can remember being out there on Christmas Eve in the pitch dark delivering that food.

Jerry Ann: That was a good thing.

Sandra: They were appreciative of it – the directors and managers were appreciative. And they finally, in their defense, started taking up money to buy the food. So that we didn't have to go together to buy the food.

Gertrude: We didn't have to bring it all.

Evelyn: And Sandra would be in charge, and she and Gertrude would dip the fruit in sugar.

Sandra: We didn't know what we were doing, but we would try anything.

Evelyn: All the fresh greenery – we have some wonderful pictures.

Bonnie: We weren't fortunate enough to have those in the days that I was working. Everybody was just on the go, go, go, go.

Jerry Ann: Porter smoked. I don't know how many of the other Center Directors smoked.

Gertrude: They didn't smoke in our office; we had signs.

Jerry Ann: Marshall decided that it would be a "No Smoking" facility, so he would go out on the front of the 4200 [building], and they had a picnic table out there. Oftentimes, people would drop by, knew he would be there. He would have unscheduled meetings with people from every agency, from every walk of life on that center. It was really good. It made a very close bonding. That was a good thing. He was available, and they knew he would be available at such and such time because he was taking his smoking break and he'd be sitting under that ... at that picnic table under the tree. Oftentimes people would call and they'd say, "Is he under the tree? Is he at the picnic table?" I thought that was really great. It brought in some of the lower -- I don't want to say lower class -- but the real worker bees that would talk to him. He gained a lot of information from those people.

Joann: Porter was a real people person. [All nod in agreement.] That was his real strong suit.

Beth (and several): He really cared. He really cared about what was going on. He cared about NASA; he cared about Marshall.

Jerry Ann: He looked for everybody's good points. I never heard him say a bad thing about anybody.

Joann: In talking about Challenger, I don't know if everybody feels the same way; but I can't watch that replayed without getting nauseous.

Gertrude: Well, I'd like to say something about Challenger because Dr. Lucas was Director at that time. It was the hardest thing in the world on him. I know what he went through day after day after day. He was not responsible, but he took the responsibility because he felt responsible. And that's when he left.

I don't know whether most people know that or not, but he went through the whole thing, the investigation; and he took it like a [?] unclear]. He later told me that it was the hardest thing he had ever gone through before. The press laid [sic] down on the sidewalk trying to catch him when he would come out of the building to go home. We would send him out the back door. We moved his car. We did all kinds of things in order to protect him in order for him to get home. One of the fellows was being haunted by the press who was in a responsibility position, and he had to climb out his windows in order to get in and out of his house. So it was quite a situation. It was hard on everybody.

All: It was hard on everybody. Everybody felt it.

Sandra: I worked in the Deputy Director's office at that time. Of course, with Dr. Lucas' situation, Mr. Lee was acting, after he left, until J. R. was selected as Center Director. The press was really a difficult problem. I mean the phone literally rang off the wall. Even though our Public Affairs people did a good job at keeping them in tow, still occasionally they would make it up to the office. It was just a constant problem and concern.

Jerry Ann and Evelyn: They were all over the floor in 4200. You could not get through the hall.

Sandra: And we had a role in handling them on the phone when they would call in. You had to be alert all the time.

Gertrude: They would call long distance. That was our big problem because you didn't usually know what they were calling about at first, and you had to be polite enough to listen. And then ...

Beth (and several): Oh...! Surprise.

Gertrude: Dr. Lucas never saw any of the press -- that I know of -- that he didn't want to see, but it was very difficult.

Beth: That was a difficult time for all of NASA employees and especially Marshall.

Sandra: I think our people rose to the occasion. All of them, Dr. Lucas, Mr. Lee, they handled it with class, all of them.

Jerry Ann: I worked over in the Investigation Committee. We were secreted away, and I was working on that for the 3 or 4 months it went on. The days were not 8-hour days. They were like 16, and there have been times when I know that they worked 24-hour days. It was really a sad time, a sad time.

Sandra: I remember a funny story to go along with that. It also sort of demonstrates how devoted Mr. Lee was to NASA and what not. It was after Dr. Lucas had left and J. R. was head of the Challenger Investigation Team, or Board; and Mr. Lee was serving on that board as well. He was one that wanted to do everything; he didn't want to turn anything down. You had to make room for it, like we said earlier,

on the calendars. He had to go to Washington the day before J. R. was calling a meeting at 8:00 a.m. the next day at the Cape. It ended up that there was an event that was going into the night. My task was to get him from D.C. to the Cape for that 8:00 a.m. morning meeting the next day. Of course, there were no commercial flights available that would get him there at that time of night. The NASA plane had flown them up there for these meetings, but you couldn't fly out of National Airport very late at night; I think after 10:00 o'clock at night. So I had to take him out of Andrews Air Force Base. And I think he probably arrived down there, it was probably at least midnight or 1:00 a.m. in the morning, and flew him into an airfield that didn't keep their lights on at night. I think other things happened there on occasion. The lights were not activated, so the plane flew very low. I remember getting a rental car to be there for him and just praying that it was there when he got off of the plane because he was by himself, and reminded him to be sure and have a quarter in his pocket to make a phone call. But he showed up for J. R.'s meeting the next morning at 8:00 a.m. They were all very driven and very dedicated.

Joann: Mr. Lee flew his own plane a lot of times when he went on trips. He would take his own plane when he went to Washington.

Sandra: Yes, he did.

Gertrude: I remember when J. R. Thompson used to go back and forth to Washington [coach?]. He would come in, and he hadn't even gone home because he'd just gotten in from a plane ride from Washington. He tried to sleep on the plane. But he came in for the meeting the next day; he was always there.

Sandra: I remember on one occasion – Jerry Ann, I think you may have been on that trip as well – when we had a nighttime launch. Mr. Lee's interns were not available to go down there, so he asked me to go support him. It was obviously a Department of Defense launch because they were always in the middle of the night. We worked all day long, got on the NASA plane after hours, and flew down to the Cape for the launch. Of course, it was scrubbed, in the middle of the night. We turned around and flew home. [To Jerry Ann] I think you worked on that trip. We flew back and got back about 5:00 a.m. People were talking about whether they were going home or going to work. And I said, "Well, what are you going to do, Mr. Lee?" He said, "Well, I'm going to work." Okay. I did run home and change clothes, but he went in and slept on the sofa, I think, in his office until, ... probably got an hour and a half sleep or whatever. They were just that dedicated.

Jerry Ann: That dedication made us want to be.

Beth: We wanted to do it for them because they were so dedicated.

Joann: I remember telling Mr. Lee that I had seen more sunrises since I'd been working for him than I'd seen in my whole life.

Sandra: I saw a lot of sunsets up there too. I know what you mean.

Joann: The window faced east, and I saw the sunrise in the morning with that window there.

Beth: And then sometimes you would see the sunset when it reflected around, the red sky. I'd make Art Stephenson stop lots of times and look up. It was so exquisite.

Joann [to Bonnie]: And Mr. Lee wanted to use Dr. von Braun's desk when he became Director.

Bonnie: Did he get it?

Joann: He did.

Beth: It was still there when ...; Dr. Littles used it.

Sandra: I had the task, Joann, of finding a use for that desk. That was when we moved into the Director's office after Evelyn and J. R. left and they were remodeling the office. And you said, "The only thing I ask is that I get to have Dr. von Braun's desk in there in some capacity." Of course, we had shifted over to more of a period type furniture. So I decided to use it as a computer table, a credenza. The curve in the desk just fit nicely into the corner. We had a plate made for it.

Beth: What happened to that? Where is it now?

Sandra: It's on the 10th floor, in the corridor. I think Axel [Roth] was the last one to use it.

Bonnie: Have you ever had to drive home in the snow?

Beth: Oh, that was Dr. Littles' first duty. When he came back from Washington as Center Director, the first thing he had to do was close the center down for a couple of days because of an ice storm. We always teased him about closing the center because he was coming.

Bonnie: Dr. von Braun had a Congressional hearing that he was supposed to attend early the next morning. We were working late. He had been in meetings all day long. He decided that he was going to change several things in there, in his testimony. Everybody had long since been gone home. He said, "Bonnie, could you retype this for me before you go home and send it to me. He said, "I'll go ahead and have dinner with the family." Well, it was long past dinner time. It was snowing outside. When I called the driver to come to pick up the testimony to take to him, he said, "Do you realize that there's a big snow on the ground? Don't you have a long way to drive?" I said, "I have to drive up the mountain to Eva." He said, "Oh my goodness!" That was one time I drove home scared. It was snowing; all you could see was the snow. I worked late a lot of nights, but that one was one that was really frightening. I didn't mind working late whenever he needed me. I was there.

Gertrude: They used to kid me about locking up the building because I went home late every night.

Bonnie: I was always late getting home. You couldn't carpool because you never knew when you could go home.

Joann: I can remember driving home, and the fog was so thick that I couldn't see the landmarks. I started to get really nervous because I wasn't going to be able to see where the road is where I'm supposed to turn to go to my house. I had a car phone at the time. I called my husband and I said, "You may not see me tonight because I don't know where my mailbox is." It was so foggy.

Beth: [first pause to inquire of interview coordinator about time frame] As you can see, we could go on forever and ever.

Joann: One of the things I was going to mention is that we had a little perk there on the 9th floor. We had our own kitchen, with a microwave.

Gertrude: Yes [laughs]. We could fix lunch for our bosses.

Evelyn, Gertrude, others: [Laughter] That was really a perk! We could warm coffee too. We could fix lunch there. And we did it lots of times too!

Bonnie: Dr. von Braun ate soup out of the kitchen many days for lunch.

Gertrude: That's about all Dr. Lucas ate.

Beth: Dr. Littles went on a diet – cabbage soup diet! You remember it, Sandra?

Sandra: I remember how it smelled.

Beth: I would heat it in the kitchen – you know how cabbage smells – just the whole 9th floor. Bebe sent in a candle for me to burn, one of those kitchen candles, because she said, "I know how it smells because it does at home." So he'd say, "Beth, I'm ready for soup." I'd light the candle and put his soup on. That kitchen saved our lives. [all nod in agreement]

Joann: You didn't have to leave the floor.

Gertrude: No, you could eat at your desk, if you got a chance. [laughs]

Joann: With the interruptions, it might take an hour or two hours to finish.

Sandra: For a brief while – well, maybe not a brief while -- you'll remember, Gertrude, we had Bea. When Dr. Lucas was director, he held what they called the executive staff luncheon. Bea would come

over and bring food from the cafeteria, and she would prepare it in the little kitchen. If she had time, she would always bring the secretaries hot tea in the mornings. That was always very nice. I remember that ... I guess one of the things ... we all said that the world turned upside down after Challenger. Dr. Lucas left, and Mr. Lee was Acting Director. He thought that the executive luncheons had proven to be a good thing, but it was time to maybe do something different now, so he decided not to hold those. Give people a little bit of time during the day to do errands or whatever. But I remember him asking me how we were going to feel about losing Bea. Now that means that you all won't have your hot tea or coffee served to you.

Gertrude: She was a love.

Sandra: Yes, she really was. But I think every Director and every secretary brings something different to the table. I think we all experienced much the same thing, but yet the differences because of our bosses and their personalities. And then what we ourselves brought to the table. I think we probably all handled the job a little bit differently than the other one; doesn't mean that one was better than the other, but we all made it work.

Evelyn: There was a lot going on at NASA at the time.

Bonnie: Dr. von Braun would always bring me notes. When he would be on a business trip somewhere and run into somebody, he would have names and phone numbers scribbled down on paper napkins, on brown paper sacks, tear off the corner of a file folder, etc. I would have to keep up with all these notes because he'd say, "When I go to Los Angeles next time, I want to ... make me an appointment with him. I would have to keep a tickler file of all these contacts, all these notes that he'd written to me, whether it be in New York, or Washington, or the West Coast, wherever. When he would schedule a trip, then I'd get out all these little notes and try to work in appointments. Sometimes I would have to say, "If you'll meet him at the airport and drive him to where he's going, you can have a little conversational meeting with him in the car on the way." So I arranged a lot of meetings that way when there was not enough time to schedule something. If they'd pick him up at the airport or have a taxi ready; meet him in the taxi or something like that. It was something to keep up with all of these little notes that he brought to me.

All: [murmurs about value of computers]

Bonnie: You see; I was pre-computer age.

Gertrude: Also, you had to keep up with his money, didn't you? He would get somewhere and never have any money.

Bonnie: Oh, yes, I had to keep up with his money. He would go downstairs to the basement to get his hair cut. I would get a call from them saying you owe me so much for Dr. von Braun's haircut. So I would go down and pay it, or send somebody down to pay for his haircut. But I kept a running – I've still

got my books – with all these expenses. When it would get near a hundred dollars, I would say, “Dr. von Braun, you have to bring me a check.” He just didn’t carry money.

Joann: You had trouble trying to understand his accent when you came to work for him, didn’t you?

Bonnie: No, I didn’t, not really. Not face to face. He sounded different in recordings. The accent seemed more prominent in recordings than in talking face to face. I never had a problem. He would not use a Dictaphone; he hated the Dictaphone, so I had to take everything in shorthand.

Beth: Did you meet President Kennedy when he came?

Bonnie: Well, I saw him, of course; but I didn’t meet him personally; but I talked to his office many times on the phone. Evelyn Lincoln was his secretary.

Gertrude: And she came and spoke to us.

Bonnie: I got her to come down to speak to the secretaries. She’s deceased now.

Sandra: So many times we were in the background when these people. You would make all the arrangements and ... **Gertrude:** and you were on down the line.

Bonnie: You know, President Kennedy came twice. The last time he came, he wanted Dr. von Braun to go with him down to the Cape. He didn’t have a change of clothes. He said, “Bonnie, make some arrangements to get me some clean clothes down to the Cape.” He said, “I’m going with President Kennedy on his plane.” These kind of things happened.

Sandra: Whatever it took.

Beth: You know, I don’t think that they ever asked anything of us that we didn’t somehow, some way work it out.

Sandra: Well, one thing was that many times they didn’t have to ask. We just did it. We knew that they needed that.

Beth: We also had a lot of help, from the interns and from one another. We couldn’t have done it without everybody up there on the 9th floor.

Sandra: I think as a routine – and I’m sure you all did the same thing -- at night I would walk through the next day. I would literally put myself in his shoes and say, okay, what is he going to need now? For this meeting? Or this meeting? Or that meeting? How is he going to get from A to B, from B to C, etc. You just literally walk through the entire day. If he’s on a trip, where is he going to change clothes to go to

this event. What does he do with his bag when he gets there so it's going to be handy when he has to change for this evening event or whatever? You just literally walk through the day and try to anticipate.

Beth: Anything that we could do to make his day easier.

Sandra: I remember Evelyn having to order tuxedo and shoes, remember. It was for an event in Washington, wasn't it? When J. R. got there and put it on, he called back and said, "Evelyn, it fits!"

Joann: You had to keep a card for everybody's birthday.

Beth and All: And remind them -- birthdays, and anniversary. And the florist.

Sandra: But you didn't mind because you knew how busy they were. That's what our job was: to free them up to concentrate on their business and what they needed to think about.

Joann: They didn't have to worry about the details.

Sandra: Of course, Evelyn, had to order ... J. R. was not married when he came on board. She had to look after a lot of those things. I would just pick up the phone and call Jean Lee and say send his tux to the cleaners. He's going to need it next week or whatever.

Evelyn: But I don't think today that any clerical person at Marshall or industry would probably ever aspire to be a Center Director's secretary. That's just not a thing that ...

Gertrude: I think that's an era that is probably past.

Beth: Well, I didn't really aspire. I didn't think about ever ...

Evelyn: I didn't either. But I mean I don't think today that ...

Jerry Ann: I don't think they think about it.

Sandra: If they knew those demands were there, they wouldn't want it anyway.

Beth: Did you find that they all thought -- those who did so much for us down below, in the offices and laboratories, etc. -- if it hadn't been for them, I could not have done my job at all. But they seemed to think that all we did was sit up there and do our fingernails and drink tea.

Evelyn: I caught that working for a contractor. That was a real eye-opener because I thought: Who's supposed to Xerox? Who puts the paper in? We were blessed. We didn't even have a security officer. Between you and me ... guess who? So you become pretty self-sufficient.

Gertrude: I had a different background than most of you. I came from Denver, Colorado. I grew up in Kentucky. I didn't really aspire to come here except that my husband came to get in the Army and work for the Army. I was really interested in the technical areas always because Dr. Lucas was interested in the technical areas. I'd like to tell you a little story that I remembered. I don't remember it all the time so I wrote it down. It had to do with Fred Uptagrafft, if anybody remembers him. He was an engineer. When I first came and worked for Dr. Lucas, we sneaked out one day. I don't know how we ever did it, but anyway Dr. Lucas didn't know that we went over and checked the FA-1 (?) engine test. I got to go with him. We were in Engineering Materials at that time. That test was so loud. They said Dr. von Braun used to come over and listen to it. It would deafen you. In fact, I had to hold my ears in order to even talk or try to talk to him. After the test, he was so thrilled because he thought it was all good. Not only did we just listen to the test – I mean in an outside area – there were no buffers; there were no places to stand. There wasn't even a hole to get in. You just stood there and listened. Then we went up into the vehicle itself and examined it, while it was still steaming, to be sure everything went well. It was so exciting! It was the most exciting experience I think I ever had as I worked for Dr. Lucas, although he made things interesting. But I understood what was going on at Marshall. That was real! That was real! Every time I went to see a launch, I thought about that because we knew that we tested every single part of the vehicle. It was so exciting to me to be able to do that on a one-to-one basis. I'll never forget it. I thought it was worth telling.

Evelyn: We all knew what a perfectionist Dr. Lucas was. He demanded that of everyone and of himself. But I think we can credit him for instilling that in all of Marshall. For the success of the Shuttle vehicle, because I don't think that without that ... I was at a party recently where Dr. Little spoke, and he said he was down somewhere in the organization at the time of the first Shuttle launch. The edict came down that they had to look at each discrepancy. I've forgotten now how many thousands of those there were ... 30,000. They decided it was an impossible task, but they did it. I think that we really owe that to him. I know that when I did the daily journal, it was like I was entering it into a typing contest – and, you know, on an electric typewriter, no computer.

Sandra: I can remember just working in the bowels of the organization, anything you sent to Dr. Lucas' office was going to be gone over with a fine tooth comb. I can remember typing the (?) notes in the Special Projects Office that were going forward. I was so nervous I was about to lose it because I knew that either Gertrude, or Mary, or somebody, or Dr. Lucas ...

Gertrude: If it got to him, it was really bad.

Evelyn: But it was that perfection that really is the success of the Shuttle.

Gertrude: In fact, I thought I almost lost my job to begin with because when Dr. Lucas had hired me, I offered before he hired me to type something for someone, retype it, because it had an error in it. So I typed it and they took it in to him, and he found an error in it. I could have died. I was ready to go home and just forget it all. I got up my energies and I decided the thing to do was to go in and admit that it was my error. I called him on the phone and I said, "Dr. Lucas, I typed that and I made the error.

So it's my error, so you put the blame on me. And he said, "That's all right." Ever after that he seemed to understand that people are normal and they do make errors, and they do have problems. It wasn't mine to type in the first place, and I just offered to do it. But I thought, oh, I've lost my job already.

Sandra: [to Gertrude] Do you remember all those times that you had to retype his speeches at the last minute before he walked out the door? I used to feel for Gertrude.

Bonnie: That was Dr. von Braun too; he would always find something else.

Gertrude: We had *h*'s usually that he changed; you know, he wrote ... [indicating handwriting]

Joann: That was the nice part about having the computer; you could just go back into the computer and change ...

Beth: Except when you lost it. I know there's lots of things of mine just floating out in this black hole somewhere.

JoAnn: Comparing that to when I first went to work for Redstone Arsenal and we had manual typewriters, carbons, six carbons of everything, and when you erased ... We had a colonel that would hold it [indicating a piece of paper] up to the window to see how many erasures.

Beth: Then the finest thing to come along was the "white-out", SnoPak -- if you could get it just right.

Evelyn: I had the first computerized typewriter at Marshall, in the Skylab Projects Office. It was about the size of this table [indicating the conference table in front of her]. Actually the console was about the size of the table, and the typewriter was in the center. I had it because we did a lot of experiments and we had all these experiment folders. I would input them. Then I would run to the restroom. I would print it out, and it would be printing out while I went to the restroom. They rented it from Xerox. That was in '76, '77? I think it was like \$1000 a month. But it was huge!

Beth: [2nd time check] I know we could keep going forever, but Sandra has a 1:30 that she has to be back at the Center for. And then we wanted to go all have lunch over at the Bevill Center. We just may have to schedule this again. There's still a lot of stuff I want to say.

Sandra: We still have lots of stories.

Bonnie: You know Sonny Morea was over the Lunar Roving Vehicle, and they were having some problems. I was working for Dr. Rees at that time; he was the Center Director. One morning Dr. Rees came in and said, "Come here, Bonnie." I went in, and he said, "Take this memo to Sonny Morea." And he said, "The subject is: The Lunar Roving Vehicle which causes me many sleepless nights." I said, "Do you really want me to put all of that in the subject?" He said, "That's the subject." I won't ever forget that.

Beth: The first dictation I took from Dr. Stuhlinger ... When I came in, showed up for my work day, Gradine was on vacation. Dr. Stuhlinger was also, but he came back a few days before she did. He called me in to take dictation. Well, I was scared to death, didn't know how to spell dictation. Well, it was – let's see -- Jackass Flats and in-house and out-of-house contracts. Now, in Hackleburg, we didn't say jackass. I thought this can't be right; it's got to be Jackson Flats. So I changed it to Jackson Flats. Well, I thought, okay if it's in-house, it's got to be outhouse. Well, I was raised with outhouse, so I changed it to outhouse. He came in – that dear, sweet man – he was so embarrassed. He said, "Now, Beth, I know that most of our out-of-house contracts probably belong in the outhouse, but you need to change that." And he said, "And this is [in a whisper] Jackass Flats". I said, "Surely they didn't name something Jackass Flats." He said, "Oh, they did this." But he was so sweet and kind and patient. And that's what I was getting at. Every boss I ever had was so good and kind and patient with me.

Joann: We had the cream of the crop for managers.

Jerry Ann: [name unclear] had a saying. The cream rises to the top.

Beth: And it really did. I was just fortunate enough to be caught in that ebb and flow.

Bonnie: None of the three Center Directors that I worked for ever fussed at me, ever. If I made a mistake, they would calmly point it out. They didn't blow up; you know some people just explode. I rarely did.

Evelyn: If any of the travel arrangements ever went wrong when I was working for Mr. Thompson, he would never ever complain. Some of those who were on the plane would get on the phone and let me know everything. [laughs]

Joann: Do ya'll remember the time that -- I think it was NASA 9 – Mr. Odom, Mr. Kingsbury, and ... They had a problem with the landing gear.

Sandra: I remember that well. I was sitting there watching with Bethay out the window.

Joann: I think Mr. Thompson ... was on the plane too.

Sandra: We had them all there at the same time.

Joann: Mr. Odom being such a spiritual person, somebody made the comment "Well, thank the Lord Jim Odom was on that plane with us."

Bonnie: I'm sure he said several prayers.

Gertrude: He and Lucas both.

Beth: Mr. Odom out of the four musketeers – of Lindstrom, Odom, Hardy, and Thompson – Mr. Odom was the one who tried his best to keep all the other three in line, but there was just no way. One time in the office he did say – maybe -- “Damn”. Bless his heart, he spent the next six months apologizing to me and Marie for saying that. He is a gentleman.

Sandra: I think you all said we were very fortunate working for people like we did. I never remember a lot of bosses, as you say, if they were taking the heat from somebody, they would come back to the office and take it out on the people who work for them. I can truthfully say that they never did that; they just took it in stride and went on. I remember another funny thing, Gertrude. We were talking about Dr. Lucas being so particular. Mr. Lee had asked me to compose a letter for Dr. Lucas’ signature, and I did. It was not technical or anything like that; just an administrative type letter. Anyway, Dr. Lucas sent it back through him with a question mark about, I think it was one of the verbs, whether it should be plural or singular, that I had used. So he came back and said, “Now, I don’t want this to ruin your career or anything, but this little circle here; Dr. Lucas disagrees with you on this. Now you can do whatever you think is best.”

Beth: And you knew what was best, didn’t you?

Sandra: I will do as he pleases. And, of course, he was right. Everything was not so clear.

Joann: Mr. Lee was really a good boss.

Sandra: Yes, he was. Joann and I have that to share with each other. I know Joann said to me one time that she wished that he would – I think you wanted him to fuss at you. You weren’t sure you were pleasing him.

Joann: One thing you didn’t get any feedback. I always got feedback from Mr. Odom; he spoiled me all those years I was getting feedback from him. You just had Mr. Lee.

Sandra: You just assumed everything was going well unless ...

Joann: I think you said if you weren’t, you would hear about it.

Sandra: I got my hand spanked some. Sometimes I deserved it and sometimes I didn’t. I took it. It was never bad, and it was done in a diplomatic manner. And always, when asked to do something, he never told me to do anything: Would you do something? Or can you do this for me? Or Do you have time to do...? I’ve learned a lot from that leadership that has helped me with the rest of my career. You learn how to get the most out of people. That it is so much better to ask and to treat them with respect, etc.

Joann: I remember when Dr. Little came when I was in Hubble, and he would come walking up to the desk with his pipe in his mouth, strutting down the hall. You know, this was the impression I had of him.

He would say, “Where’s the meeting?” I would tell him and he would walk away and I would say, “I wouldn’t work for that man for anything.” Then when I went to work for him, I just loved working for him. I had a totally different impression.

Beth: That was one of the major complaints that I had from employees about Dr. Littles. Well, he won’t speak to me in the hall. He won’t speak to me.

Joann: See, he would just walk up to my desk; it was like: “Where’s the meeting?” He didn’t address me. He’s really shy, I guess.

Beth: He’s a very shy person, but he also was very channeled, focused on where he was going and what he was doing. So I would say to these people who would complain about him not speaking: Did you speak to him first? Well no, I wasn’t going to speak to him if he didn’t speak to me. But he’s thinking as he’s walking down the hall; he didn’t see you. Well, he looked right at me. But he still didn’t see you. He’s got so many things on his mind, and would love to talk to you if you would stop him and talk to him.

Sandra: I remember the time that he testified after Challenger. That was my first really positive impression of him; I didn’t really know him that well. I just thought of him as being quiet and unassuming and maybe on the shy side. He went before Congress and testified. He was a cucumber and did so much for us with that testimony. He knew how to think on his feet and keep focused on the subject. I have a lot of respect for him.

Beth: [3rd & final time call] Okay, girls; I’m hungry. I’ve had so much fun getting you together.

Notes:

Ellipses generally indicate a pause or incomplete phrase or sentence.

Question marks (?) indicate that word was unclear or spelling/correct word could not be verified.

Brackets [] indicate transcriber comments added for explanation or clarification.