

## Transcript

Key: M = Monika Cunningham (Interviewer)

S = Suzanne Gardner (Interviewee)

M: Before we get started, I know, like I'll ask questions about your experience as a firefighter, but I want to get to know more about what you did before that because I know you graduated from Fairleigh Dickinson University first and right after that you went into social work and then you worked Recreation

S: Oh yea, you got it already

M: Yea, I know I was reading a little bit. Just wanted to get some background information. What interested you in doing that first and then going into firefighting.

S: Well, I went to... grew here in New Brunswick and I always worked in the recreation department here like when I was a kid and stuff. Then, I went to Fairleigh and I actually went in originally as an accounting major. I had one semester of accounting and I was done cause I always thought I was good at math and then accounting is not math necessarily so I just didn't want to sit behind a desk and originally, I did want to teach, but at the time teaching was so saturated that even if you got your degree I knew a lot of teachers that weren't teaching because it was just a saturated field. It was a field that , you know, that people liked to stay in. Then, when I went to Fairleigh the nearest thing to teaching was recreation. So, I went into recreation management and I actually got my degree in that and cause I worked in recreation like I said, the summers I would come home from college. Then, out of college, there weren't really any jobs immediately, but there was this job in social work and I kind of thought I could implement a little recreation in this. So, I did that, basically I was a house parent, if you will, we stayed in a rooming house with kids that were moved from their homes from DYFS and so there were like 10 to 13 girls between the ages of like 10 and 16. There are always two staff members on, two adults, at one time. They went to school and we just made... there just home environment was not safe

M: Ohh yeah, so you guys just took over.

S: Right, we tried to provide some um and with that they all went to therapy and things like that, so we tried to just provide this stable environment where they came home and two people were there. We made meals from them, we took them to therapy, we took them to recreation activities on the weekend cause we lived there and stayed with them 24/7. So, we split the week, some of us worked Thursday - Sunday and then other people worked Sunday - Thursday. We would alternate the weekends and stuff, so that's how I got into that and I did it for about 2 years and then the Jon opened up in recreation and it was a geriatric setting, but it was like right near where I lived. I lived in Linden at the time, so that would be great because I was commuting to Morristown and I figured... I did that for 6 months until the recreation job in New Brunswick opened up, so with that they knew me. I worked with New Brunswick, so they hired me and I worked there for 12 years and then, we did a festival. It was a 4th of July weekend festival where the fire department was there and they had their table and they were recruiting people for their entrance exam. I had gone to school with some of the guys or they had kids in my recreation program. I ran little league and basketball and they were like you should try this.

M: So, was it always on your mind to be a firefighter?

S: It never crossed my mind before. It did not and they pretty much talked me into taking the application cause there weren't any women. I always thought like, you know, could I carry somebody. I asked myself the same question everybody asked me after that. "Can you carry uh a person out of a building?" then when you go through training nobody does that. You're always working with someone or just getting them to a safe space is good enough too. That's kinda how I fell into firefighting. It wasn't a lifelong dream, but it was the best thing I could have ever done. I mean, when you talk about a road not taken, had I not taken that. I don't know where I would be right now, so I wouldn't be retired. I could tell you that.

M: So, with firefighting, how did your family and friends react because I know most people were support, but did you get any like... you shouldn't do this or this is...

S: No, I think they were more worried because when you're the first of anything, you know, you just don't know how people are gonna feel about it and there were some guys that were very old school on the job that didn't feel like woman should do the job or could do the job and just having to show those guys that its possible was something that they needed to be shown like when your parents tell you to do something you don't want to do it, but you're like oh well they'll see and eventually when they see that you're not afraid or that you'll even be, in some instances, better than some of the men at some things. Then they really can't question the ability once they see that it's there and I think they were more afraid for me in that... What if guys were to be a little harder on me and they weren't. I think, I don't know, if that was out of fear because they it was like "oh she's gonna sue us"

M: Yea, I was wondering how did the guys react like when you got in there

S: There were some that, well like I said, I did go to high school with some of them and some of them knew me because some of them coached for me and you know, Richie Van Lu, and I went to school with a couple of guys. Those guys were like, you know, "Sue's not like that" and they knew that I was an athlete in high school, so they kind of felt like if anybody's gonna do it, do not worry about her. So, I think I had support...

M: Yea, that's good

S:... then not and then once guys that didn't know me. And I think my connection to New Brunswick helped a lot because there was a time where most of the guys on the department lived in New Brunswick, grew up and their kids. We have legacies on the job, so I think also being part of this town since I was four I felt more connected and they respected that to that here is somebody who is from this, who knows this town, and I could talk about things that were growing up because a lot of them were my age or not much older. So, we kind of had the same childhoods and so I kind of bonded with a few guys talking about old places that were existing back then and stuff like that. I think that made it a little easy and I think the type of guys that were on for the most part, you know, had daughters. They don't want to tell their daughters that

they can't do anything they want to do. So, I think they kind of felt that this would be a good test to see how they really feel about that kind of stuff and like I said, when I got on the job I would say there was a handful of guys that felt I shouldn't have been there and by the time I left I don't think there was anybody that felt that woman shouldn't be there. Because when I left we had two more females come on the job, so knowing that any one of us would be there and right by their side or doing what we needed to do and that was important, that was the most important thing cause there were guys that they knew, they would question whether or not they would be in a building with them, but knowing that, you know, as I said if they worst case tomorrow if I can't do it, I'll most likely die trying and when you're willing to do that. I guess they kinda go well "she's not gonna leave me in the house, she's gone stay there and she's gonna try to get me" whatever the circumstance may be. So, I think, by the time I left after 18 1/2 years, the woman that are on now, they don't question their abilities and I think that now they know that as long as you show number one that the minute your tested that you're there and you're committed then what can they say. The MeToo thing kind of scared them a little bit I think. It's like "well, you know guys if you just behave yourselves"

M: Exactly, so easy

S: Nothing would happen

M: So it's kind of like, if y'all just behave and calm down we wouldn't have this right now

S: Exactly, so I mean had to draw the line for what was acceptable and what wasn't acceptable and the line I had to draw was just treat me like your sister. I mean you joke around with your sister yeah, but do you touch your sister. No, you don't do that, at least you shouldn't, right?

M: Yeah

S: So, those were the kind of lines you had to draw in the sand just so that they knew what the boundaries were and they, you know, sometimes... Personally, I know I could say some things that were a little, you know, were a little [intelligible] but that was me. They knew what they

could say in front of me and what they could, you know, but there were things that were if I told them if I were uncomfortable... I had to tell them I couldn't just assume they would know that and that's were you really... communication had to be there in order for everyone to be comfortable working there. It is a unique environment. You know, with you dad doing it, it's like where else do you spend 24 hours with a group of people and I watched guys get married, I watched guys get divorced, I watched them have kids. People go on vacation together, they're godparents to each other's kids, you know, it really is a very unique work environment in that you wouldn't get that in an office setting, you wouldn't get that, even with the police. Even though they do spend, that's probably the next thing, because they spend 12 hours shifts with guys. But I can't imagine sitting in a car with someone that you really didn't like. You know, at least the firehouse you can do your own thing and you don't have to, but there weren't even people that...there are people that you love working with and there are people that you tolerated working with like any work environment. But, if it was so bad, you could work it out so maybe you worked in a different house or in a different rig, you know, something like that. So yea, that's my experience and I think, is it the norm? I've heard horror stories from some women. Especially the women in New York, I got to meet a few of those that were the first female, they had a group of 20 women that actually had to sue in order to take the test. That's how bad that was. Imagine that, I just want to take a test and the men didn't like that at all. So, I definitely did not have that experience, but it's not for everybody male or female that's for sure. There are things you love about it and there are things you don't, you know. But, just like any job I guess, you know.

M: So how is the test? Is it like there's a written exam and a physical one right?

S: Right

M: Did you find them pretty easy or were they a little difficult?

S: Well, when I, they changed it a little bit, when I was looking to get on you had to take a written test and if you passed the written test, um, you then had to take the physical and then you got a score. Then they combined the scores and you were ranked. Now it's basically they rank you by your written and only if they're looking to hire do they make you take the physical. So

you still have to pass the written test, but, and also the written, uh, the, uh, physical is now a flat out pass, fail time test. Whereas we had to go and do the best time we could to get ranked and then, you know, then they would see where you fell on the list with a combined score, You know, and the women have a disadvantage with that. You know, very few women would come out in top physically with the test and, you know, it is job related. It's not like it's not, but the amount of speed that you need to do, it really isn't, you know, the fact that, you raise a ladder or you, you know, you drag a hose. No one's out there on a scene with a stopwatch. Saying, no, you gotta do it faster. You know, but, um, so when they made that part of the test pass or fail, um, there is some speculation that they did that, so that more females would be able to, you know, get on the job. And it doesn't give the females an advantage, but it gives them the opportunity because I probably did much better on the written part of the exam than I did on the physical part because of where I came out on the list. I came out 18th out of, I think it was over 200 guys, so yeah. You know, so my physical score wasn't bad. It was the top score, I think at the time it was maybe two minutes and 30 seconds. I did, I did it in like 3:40, so you can see there's a whole difference there. But there was a bunch of guys that were behind me who might have had better physical scores, but they didn't have the written part. Even the guys that were top with the physical didn't make the best firefighters. I mean, they just, didn't a lot of 'em, you know, weren't the firefighter material. We had a couple that didn't wind up taking the job, or didn't wind up going through the academy and things like that. So, um, you know, it was physically challenging for anyone, but especially for females, but I think being an athlete all my life, I love that challenge. And that was the one thing I had to say about the whole thing with firefighting. It's like doing something you've never done before, you know, learning all the stuff I had to learn. It wasn't just something that, you know, you do every day. But the written test, yeah, the written test was, was a lot of basic skills they wanted to make sure you could read, they wanted to make sure you could write and then do some problem solving because you know, that's a lot of the job is problem solving on the spot. So, you know, and that's what to me always made the difference, a good firefighter and a great firefighter was that you can physically be strong and carry somebody outta a building, but reading the building or seeing where you should go in a building or how you should approach something, you don't have to be super strong to have that skill. And I think some of our best firefighters are really the guys that think are really good thinkers and just on top of things and really look at things and very quickly can make decisions very quickly. Um,

those are gonna be your better firefighters. I think just because time is of the essence when you're fighting a fire. The difference a minute can make, you know, in driving whether or not you're gonna go left or right. That could, that could make all the difference in the world. All of a sudden I made a left, I'm sitting in traffic, I made a right. If I just made a right.

M: And also, um, what is it? You drove, which truck did you drive?

S: Oh, I drove, I drove engine one. It was funny because everybody learns how to drive, not everybody likes to do it. A lot of guys all wanna go in and wanna, you know, they call it slaying the dragon. And I'm only 5ft 2in, so you know, there are certain jobs that are tailored for certain physiques. I was not going to be this great ladder firefighter, this firefighter that was on ladder. That's usually your taller guys, your stronger guys and I'm quite right with not being a ladder. I mean, I knew the skills and you had to, you had to be on both. You were trained on both, but I felt more, I can contribute more and be more, and I was more comfortable. What happened when I got on the driver of the engine one wanted to go, he wanted to be on ladder and they had no one that wanted to drive. So I said, okay, I'll do it. I loved it. I, I, you know, I mean, yeah, there, there are times that we're sitting there, we're listening to these stories about stuff that happened inside and I'm on the outside. I didn't, you know, you didn't know it was happening but getting there, you know, getting water, and then sometimes if you were not necessarily the first engine due, the first engine due is the engine that's pretty much going to be getting the water on the fire, supplying the water. If you're second due or third due, you're gonna hook up a supply line to the engine and then you're, you are gonna go in and you, you do it take a backup line. And I got to do that and that was okay, but I did love driving. Um, and it turns out like, you know, the one officer that was kind of like, not thrilled about me coming on was the guy I was driving and He, I, we had this bond, we had this nice relationship and he liked me driving him. He felt good about me being there and that, that to me was when I saw that that was how, if someone, if someone that had his mindset, when I got on the job could now go from not wanting me on the job to wanting me driving him, uh, you know, and pumping a fire for him. That's how secure he felt with me being there and, and working with him. So that was, um, probably one of the nicest things I think that came out of, of doing what, what I did and you know, that, and the job is just, you know, it's just a great job. I mean, it sucks sometimes it does. You know, and you gotta go

out and it's snowing and the weather is horrible or, you know, you got a hurricane coming and you can't be with your family and hoping that, you know, that you just gotta hope that they're okay. Um, but, for the most part, helping people, which is something that, you know, I just always loved doing so it's, and it was like, and I got paid for it. So that was even better, you know? So

M: Mm-Hmm, did you ever, like, I know you were on the job for a while. Did you ever think about like, testing for like captain or Lieutenant, or that was never?

S: You know, guys were disappointed that I didn't.

M: Right. Cause I was thinking you...

S: Yeah. Uh, I, I think for me it was never really an aspiration to be a Lieutenant or a captain or any cause, you know, when you're the first you're thinking like, man, I just wanna be able to do the job to the best of my ability and that was my focus and I never really, uh, it wasn't a drive for me. Uh, I did take the written test, but then I didn't, I didn't bother pursuing the, uh, and part of it too was because I started driving very early on. I, like I had two years on and I was driving steadily to go from driving to, you know, to scenarios where you're inside and you've gotta tell people what to do. I just didn't have that kind of experience and I didn't feel like reading a textbook was good enough. I really needed, I felt I needed hands on experience and I didn't have that and I could have requested, you know, not driving anymore and going in. But again, I think it was just came down to, I did have a fear of failure with that because I didn't want them to look at me and go, "oh, see, this is why you shouldn't, shouldn't be on the job", you know, but we just promoted our first female Lieutenant.

M: Oh yeah, I heard

S: Yeah and she came out on not this test, but she came out like, I think number two on one of the previous tests. So, you know, and the guys, again, they knew that she could do the job. So, there's no question that she didn't, she didn't deserve getting promoted or anything like that. And



the same thing, with the female that came after her, I think with the female who came on after her dad was a deputy chief. So, she's been around firefighting all her life and she's proven herself as a firefighter already. So, I didn't, it wasn't an aspiration, but guys were disappointed that I didn't, you know. But I felt, "Hey, would you rather have somebody who knows what they're doing driving or somebody who doesn't know what they're doing taking you in." And it was more of I would rather have somebody to have that responsibility and especially now the department, um, they're is so young. And so, you know, I look at, and I see, um, they got, you know, young drivers, they have young officers and now they got two new recruits, you know, hanging on the back. I'm thinking the pressure of just making sure that they're safe is yeah. You know, I mean, so yeah, I was alright with not doing it.

M: You're like, I'm good

S: Yeah, the pay bump would've been nice, but you know, it's okay.

M: And I saw that you retired like two years ago, right. Was your decision to retire easy or it was like, you know, it's time I've had.

S: Well actually thats a good. Yesterday was my anniversary. I was thinking about when this was all gonna, cause I loved it. You know, I was thinking like, "oh, when, well, when do you stop?". And it's like, you know, there' a time where you, the longer you're on it doesn't matter pension wise, it doesn't matter how long you stay on. You're not gonna get any more money out of the pension, but guys will stay on when they know they're gonna get promoted. And those things, um, you know, so like 30 years for us is like the maximum amount of time that you won't get anything more outta your pension. But if guys are looking saying, "Hey, I got 30 years in, but I'm number one to be a captain", you know, people will stay and know that then they'll be promoted to captain and then that's their retirement. So it's a smart move financially, but since that wasn't in play for me and COVID had just, we had just got hammered with COVID.

M; Right? Yeah. That's around the time.

S: Yea and being at work was so stressful as far as things you could and couldn't do. You couldn't eat together, you couldn't even be, you couldn't hang out together. Calls were stressful because they wouldn't let, you had to mask up and then you had to document it. It was just, it was really, it was not fun. It was not the place that I had been for 18 years and then, you know, my chiefs, all the people that I learned from were all leaving. I kind of felt like my shift was gonna change so much that and I was like, "why, why stay?" It just so happened that my 30 year that number was coming up for me. So when I said, the whole thing for me was it was a hard decision because I did love the job and I thought, "okay, what am I gonna do now?" Cuz you know, they always tell you, you should have a plan like when you have gonna retire, like at least a year out, know what you wanna do. But even if I had a plan, it wouldn't have mattered because the world stopped for two years or at least a year and a half. My plan was to travel a little bit and I wanted to go and do some habitat building, cuz I love habitat for humanities. I was just gonna go and travel around and do that. And none of that was happening so, you know, I thought, "okay, well I could have just stayed and worked", you know, until the world opened up again. But I didn't like being at work as much as I had. So that was, it was hard in that I didn't have a plan but it, it was, I felt I had no regrets about doing it. And people ask you like "how's retirement?" I'm like, "well to be honest, it doesn't suck." It really doesn't but I, you know, and the most important thing you miss the guys and I'm still here in New Brunswick so I still see the guys and they still like reach out. They still invite me to stuff so that aspect of it is still very much part of what I loved about the job. I still kind of have not on an everyday basis and that I do miss, but, as far as, uh, you know, the decision, I felt it was, it was kind of time for me plus, you know, getting older it's a young person's job. It's very physically demanding and I'm like, and I thought, you know, okay, you go up the Rig, have some old lady, you know, and it just kind of felt like, wow, like, cuz the joints are hurting more and you constantly have to worry about keeping up your strength so you can lift the tools and drag the hoses and do the job and drag the hoses and, and do the job. I just felt like it was good. It was good to say. I mean, I still do that stuff, but definitely not to the same. I don't feel the pressure of having to, oh, I gotta do, you know, 25 pound curls cause the lightest tool we have is 25 pounds you know and stuff like that, but yeah, so.

M: That's good. So looking back at your, your whole career, your whole life, you wouldn't change anything, maybe start fire fighting earlier, or you just keep...?

S: Yeah, well, you know, I did actually put the application in, it was the written the, the application in when I first got with the city. Um, and then what I was with recreation at the time, I think I might have been with recreation for two, two years. So, to say that now I think about, it was an aspiration, but I thought like, "Oh, well it's a physical job. Let me try it." And I did put the application in, but then the things that had happened at the recreation department didn't really allow for me to take the test because we had four people in recreation when I was working there and two had left, one was about to leave and so there was no programmers, so I stayed and I figured, okay, well, and they, at the time they were offering the test every two years, so I thought, "okay, well maybe I'll just take it again," and then they didn't put the test, they were revamping it. So eight years went by before they offered the test again. And, that's when I threw my hat in the ring with that one. But, you know, it was funny, I think when you asked me if it wasn't an aspiration, like, oh, when I was a kid, but now I remember that. Yeah, I did. I did put my application in to take the test, but just never took it. It was because I think I felt recreation was, you know, it wasn't a strong pull to do, to be a firefighter, but had I done it then I, that was when your dad got on

M: Really?

S: That was the list that he was on so that competition. I don't know if I would've even gotten on at that point, because that list had a ton of people on there and they were good fire, good good men, they were good in shape and yeah, I don't think I would've done so well on that test. So, and it was funny, because when I finally did do it and they were gonna hire me. Bob McLaughlin was the director and he came in and he just said to me, he goes, you know, Sue, he goes, "I really think you're the right person. And this is the right time," because I think, I know the guys that came on with your dad, there was a different group of guys to firehouse. There was a different mentality and I know they had it hard, you know, with being new guys and the ribbing that they took. So I don't think it would've been a good, a good experience for me back then if I even came close enough to be one of those, those guys at the time. Cause I think the mentality was very

different. The time that I came on there were guys like your dad and um, you know, other guys that were kind of like, "yeah, you know, I think a female could do this job," They weren't...

M: Much better, open-minded yeah

S: Yeah, yeah. You know, and I think because there were times I'd go to retirement dinners for guys I didn't know where you go and they're like, "ah, you would've never made it when I was on," and I just said, "I don't think I would've wanted to be there when you were on you guys were there," That wouldn't have been fun for me. So, I think that that's funny to think about that, that aspect of it, but I think timing is everything in life. As you know, you probably have had experience with that yourself. Just knowing that if a decision needs to be made or that if you don't do something or if you do do something that it's the time to do it or not to do it. You hope it works out for you in the end, as opposed to having regrets or whatever, but you know, no regrets about the decision to do it once I did it. It kind of worked out alright, so.

M: That's good. So is there any advice you would give, like females entering a more male dominated, like job field? Is there anything, you know?

S: Yeah. Um, you know, I once said just because you see that it hasn't been done doesn't mean it shouldn't be done or that it can't be done, you know, when you're gonna be the first of anything, it's scary. There's no one that, you know, has, there's no one that could show you the way you have to make your own way. But, that's the biggest thing for me is like, you know, to just not be afraid. And I think more women aren't afraid to be in men dominated fields. Which is a good thing, you know, whether or not to be competing physically against men, you know, those kinds of fields. You think about it now, it's like women astronauts, it's like how much of that's physical? How much of that's mental? You know, and you see all the fields that are out there now that a lot of women are, are excelling in. I think in a lot of fields, especially ones that require organization, I think women excel in those positions because just, we are innately organized. I'm not gonna say they're everybody, but.

M: Yeah, most women are

S: Yeah, that because women have to juggle so much because I mean, men don't worry about having to keep a family together necessarily, and everything, not that they don't, because the one thing I will say about the firefighters is that because of the schedule we had, there were a lot of hands on dads and a lot of 'em were better, you know, with knowing what their kids were like growing up, as opposed to, you know, the nine to five dads that didn't get to spend a lot of time or, you know, was he working and then left it all on the shoulders like, I used to, you know, talk to them and they just, it was just like, some of them, some of them were just absolutely, they loved the fact that they got to spend the time with their kids, you know? I think that was one of the nicest things about the jobs with the time off was that guys got to be a little bit more hands on with their kids than, you know, maybe other jobs. And then some guys just work two jobs to just be better at providing things for their kids. So, you know, but I just think that women, yeah, you gotta go for it. You do, you do, it's like, if you fail, you can't say, oh, you know, I didn't try. Yeah, exactly. But, you know, and we were talking about this the other day about the kids that are growing up now and of course, everybody gets a trophy kind of syndrome. And I was talking to a couple teachers and they were talking about how kids are really suffering in the schools after what happened a year ago. They lost a year, they lost a year and a half. A lot of the social skills are now, you know, they're rusty, or if they were developing, they kind of just got shut down . But we were talking about how that combined with the generation growing up, where everybody gets a trophy, that they don't suffer failure, they don't suffer loss, or they don't suffer, you know, or learn how to be a good loser. And then just know that that makes you work harder the next time.

M: Yeah

S: You don't want, you don't want it to happen again, you know, that kind of stuff. And, um, you know, for women, it's you know, in a man's field, you're always gonna have that stigma that, you know, "well, you probably shouldn't have been doing it anyway," but when you succeed, what are they gonna say to you? You know? Exactly. So, you know, just, yeah, that, that would be my one thing is just because you see it hasn't been done doesn't mean it shouldn't or that it can't be so.

M: That's good. I see we're running out of time, two minutes left before they close out this zoom meeting.

S: Oh, okay. Yeah.

M: Thank you so much for doing this. No, it was good, it was really good talking to you. I really appreciate you doing this.