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Robert Demmons

Robert Demmons: First African American Chief of the San Francisco Fire Department

California Fire Departments Oral History Project

Interviews conducted by
Shanna Farrell
in 2016

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Mayor Willie L. Brown swore in Chief Robert L. Demmons as the eighteenth Chief of the San Francisco Fire Department on January 17, 1996. He joined the San Francisco Fire Department in 1974 and was successfully promoted through the ranks.

Robert Demmons was the first African American Fire Chief for the San Francisco Fire Department (SFFD). He joined the department in 1974 and was successfully promoted through the ranks. He was sworn in as Chief on January 17, 1996. In this interview, Demmons discusses his childhood and education, early career with PG&E, taking the civil service exam for the SFFD, roles held in the fire stations, joining and reforming the Black Fire Fighters Association from a social organization to an advocacy group, taking on leadership roles, working to integrate the department, challenges and triumphs, discrimination, legal battles and the consent decree, working with city officials, moving up the ranks and into the role of Chief, creating effective programs for training, strategic plans, neighborhood engagement, and paramedics merger, reforming exams, retirement, and his hopes for the future.

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[End of Interview]

Interview 1: July 19, 2016

01-00:00:12

Farrell: This is Shanna Farrell, with Robert Demmons on Tuesday, July 19, 2016 in Oakland, California and this is our first session for the California Firefighters, San Francisco Fire Department oral history project. Robert, can you start by telling me where and when you were born and a little bit about your early life?

01-00:00:32

Demmons: I was born in 1940 in Dallas, Texas, and two years later my family moved to San Francisco. My father came first to work at the shipyard during World War II. My mother, my older brother and older sister and I followed. I don't know how much longer, but obviously a few months after he had found a job, and so we moved to San Francisco for a short period at that time. After that, we moved to Richmond in the public housing facilities there and we lived there until I was eight years old. My brother, he's ten years older than I am, and my late sister, she was six years older, and she was sort of—I guess her main responsibility was looking after me, which wasn't easy.

When we lived in Richmond, I guess that was my first time really being aware of segregation because all the blacks lived in one area and all the whites lived in another area in the housing public areas and although I went to school, the schools were integrated. Also, the nursery school that I went to was integrated, but there was definitely separation from families based on race during those years.

When I was eight years old, my parents separated and later divorced, but I had an aunt, my father's youngest sister, she lived in Denver, Colorado, her and her husband and they didn't have any children. I later found out that for some reason they weren't able to have children. So she came out and took me back to Denver with her and at the time, I thought it was for just a short stay and I didn't realize, until a few years ago—she passed away two years ago, at 106 years old. So I lived with her for a year and during that period. We went to Texas, Cleburne, Texas, twice, because I had an aunt that was very ill and she went there to check on her. After a year, she put me on the train and I came—I was eight, nine years old. I came from Denver back to Richmond on the train, by myself, and so my father picked me up at the train station and that's when he told me that my mother and sister had moved back to San Francisco. Now, my older brother, he was eighteen, like I said, he was ten years older than I, and my father, they didn't get along too well. My father one day packed a suitcase, took me over to San Francisco to where my mother was living and my sister was there.

My mother worked. My mother went to barber school after working in the shipyard and so she had long hours, and just deciding, I guess that was why I didn't have a problem with women being in nontraditional roles. So, apparently he hadn't told her that he was bringing me there because I could tell by the conversation between my sister and him and my sister got on the

phone. I didn't really understand what was going on and for the next two, three years, I lived in San Francisco and like I said, I was sort of hard to deal with.

I guess I skipped over something that my aunt told me. She didn't tell me this until about five years ago, that the reason that she sent me back home was because I was just too bad. So, I was like that. And it seems, even in Richmond, my best friend was like about three years older than me and he turned out to be sort of a big gangster later in life, in Richmond, but somehow he and I became friends. When I moved back to San Francisco, the neighborhood I lived in, it was one of the guys that lived in the neighborhood, we were sort of together and the leader was this guy, Napoleon. He was like five years older than me, and some of the other kids that were there were about my age too, and some were older, fourteen and on down. But he sort of adopted me, for whatever reason, as a younger brother, and he was a pretty mean individual but he was never mean to me, for some reason. He sort of adopted me and during that time, it was interesting, he would have us, from time to time—and I was only eleven, ten, eleven, and there was at least one or two other guys that were a year or two younger than me, and he would have us fighting grown men. I recall one time, that one of the guys, it was some man that he saw a man that evidently had treated his mother pretty bad and we all jumped on him.

But a lot of that stuff in my background, I never shared with my wife, shared with her that I fought men when I was a boy, and it was interesting that two months prior to us being in Napa one time, we ran into one of the guys I used to fight with. He happened to be visiting Napa with his wife. The four of us had lunch together and so he brought it up. He said, "Do you remember how Napoleon used to have us fighting grown men?" Later on, this guy Napoleon, he became like probably one of the biggest gangsters in San Francisco; he was into everything. Several things, I guess, that saved me, when he later got killed—shot in the barber shop—but one of the things that saved me was the values that I learned at home, and even though I was out on the street and exposed to all that stuff, okay I knew right from wrong—if you live that lifestyle, you have to not care about other people. You have to be willing to take advantage of other people and that just didn't sit right with me.

So, getting back to when my father remarried, when I was in the sixth grade, and so I moved to Berkeley. Him and my stepmother were renting a room or whatever, in this house, his friend's house, until they bought a house in Oakland. I graduated from elementary school in Berkeley and I went to junior high, they call that middle school now, but junior high in Berkeley. While there, my father and stepmother bought a house in Oakland, so I moved to Oakland. I had a stepbrother who was five years older than me, so when I moved to Oakland, during those years too, I used to have like a hair-trigger temper and my older brother, when I was real young, he was a boxer and he

taught me a few things. So, and I think that was one of the things that Napoleon was reading there because I was pretty good in defending myself.

Plus, I was always small, which gave people the opinion that they could do stuff. During that time in Oakland, what was going on was a lot of African Americans were moving from the South, to Oakland especially, and a lot of boys that were here already, they just tried to take advantage and pick on people from the South because they thought they could get away with it. But I had been in the streets in San Francisco and Richmond, so I had a different outlook on things, and so eventually, I started getting a reputation, not that I was looking for it, but I did, and there was a gang around in the neighborhood, sort of a loose-knit gang at the time. The elderly lady that lived next door to us, her grandson and granddaughter used to come up from Southern California during the summer and spend time with her. One day her grandson was in-between the houses and he was crying and I asked him what was going on. He said a gang of boys across the street had jumped on him. So I went over and me and the leader got into it. I didn't come out on the bottom end, and so from that, later on, a lot of the people in the neighborhood started following me for whatever reason. I guess if someone did something, bullied someone, then I would go after the bully. So I sort of had that reputation and it grew.

I went to about 90-something percent African American middle school, junior high school—Hoover Junior High—and I left there and went to McClymonds, which was, as you're probably aware, that McClymonds was 90-something percent black. The state bought my father's house—where 580 is now—between Market and West, that section. We had a house right there where the freeway is. So, he bought another house further north, in Oakland, and so I had to transfer to Oakland Tech. I'll back up. One of the things that was going on in Hoover and McClymonds was the teachers just seemed to want to just move you along, not really teach you but keep you moving, you know? It was interesting; I was pretty good in math and when I was in the tenth grade, they put me in the math class with twelfth graders. A lot of them asked me different parts but I had no encouragement and during that time. I really used to love to draw and I wanted to be an artist, you know. I used to go to the library and get books, mostly it was old masters and stuff in the books, but I really wanted to be an artist.

So, when I went to Oakland Tech, there was more diversity there and I noticed that in the art classes, that the art teacher wouldn't spend any time talking to me or any of the other black kids about college and stuff, but the white kids, she did. Let me back up also—when I was in junior high school, there were two art teachers. When I look back on it now, the years, I can't say for sure, but I think that he was gay, you know, but he really encouraged me, you know, he really encouraged me. And in fact, a lot of times, when I would draw different things, he would say take this down to Mr. Chambers and show him. He was the first teacher that I recall that just really inspired me and did things to encourage me.

01-00:15:06

Farrell: What was his name?

01-00:15:07

Demmons: Mr. Lapp. That really helped me a lot in terms of where I wanted to go and I was really encouraged. When I got to Oakland Tech, like I said, that was sort of a disappointment. My mother had said that once I got old enough—because I skipped over a part when I was eleven—my sister married. She first moved around the corner and then she moved further, but she couldn't really handle it, that I was just out there. I was eleven years old and I was all over San Francisco with the guys I ran with. One of the guys later got a car and like I said, I was only eleven years old. We were all up in Hunters Point, and I lived in the Fillmore, and so that was an experience. I went back to live with my mother when I was sixteen.

In fact, when I was sixteen, I joined the National Guard and they were segregated. We used to meet in Alameda and then I went out in the desert one summer for a couple of weeks with them. One of the sergeants got—my father had to—I put my age up, I was sixteen and you had to be seventeen. So, one of the master sergeants, he said that he was going to put me where I could learn radar and stuff, like he saw some potential. When I moved back to San Francisco to live with my mother, I didn't go to the meeting, so I guess I think they knew all along, so they just, they gave me an honorable discharge and said it was because I was underage, which I was. I went to Poly High School in San Francisco when I moved back over there. I used to see Napoleon periodically. I wasn't really running with him all the time, but I would see him. He would try to encourage me to get into some of the stuff that he was going to do, and showing me different things.

When I got to Poly, I said that what I was going to do, I was going to really knuckle down and pay attention to my school and all the rest of the things that go with it. There was one night I was with some guys and they decided to form a gang, and they wanted me to be the treasurer. I did, and it turned out to be a pretty big gang in San Francisco later. But, I was saved because later on, I went in the Marine Corps. Prior to that, what happened when I was at Poly, a friend of mine and I, we had to go in the school to buy our bus pass, and we were trying to rush, to go over to an area where all the kids used to go and smoke before class. So they had this football player, about six-five or whatever, he was pretty big, and he, as football stars do, he had girls on both sides of him, left and right, walking real slow down the hall. I just gently tapped him on the shoulder and said, "Excuse me." He turned around and grabbed me like that, and so I said, "Let me go," you know tried to avoid it. He tried to do something, so I was able to knock him down, get on him, and I was beating him up pretty good. The boy's dean came down and he got me off of him and suspended me. I told him that hey, I didn't start it. My mother obviously was upset, and she was on the phone with him, trying to explain. The dean was saying the boy had to go to the hospital and I said well ask him,

did he ask any of the girls, they saw what happened, and so he told my mother that his girlfriend was so upset that she had to go the hospital too, and so I got expelled, I got kicked out of school. When I went around, I had to go around to my classes, and I recall some of the teachers saying, "What?" Because like I said, I had really knuckled down and I was really trying to take care of business. The interesting thing to that was years later, after I got out of the Marine Corps, one of my friends, he went there three years and I'd only gone there less than a semester and the dean remembered me but he didn't remember this guy.

So, I left Poly and I was like, "What am I going to do?" They sent me to continuation high school and the principal there said, "You don't belong here." At the end of the semester he said, "I'm going to transfer you to Mission High School." Okay. So, what happened was, it was right before Christmas and in my art class we were making things for children in the hospital. I don't remember exactly what it was, and during this time was, like I said, when a lot of the stuff was going on in the South and we had just got a black and white TV. I used to see some of the things that were going on, what was happening to the people. I remember Emmett Till getting killed. I remember seeing that in the media and it really affected me.

So in this art class, they were all sitting around the table. Some of the students were already in, were going to stay in there, so when the rest of us came in, there was a seat by this young lady. I sat in the seat and I guess at the time, I was more interested in talking to her than I was the art. We had this teacher and she was probably in her twenties, she was young, and she ended up calling the roll. She came and she said to me, "Get out of my seat, I'm sitting there." I said, "Oh, there's a seat there," and so she said, "Well, if I had you in the South, you wouldn't talk to me like that." And so that just, like I said, that hit me. So I said some things to her and she ran out of the classroom and got the principal and he came in and he expelled me. So that day, a friend of mine was in school, he left school with me, and we went downtown and I said, "What am I going to do?" You know, I was really, really going through it.

Before that, I had talked about going in the Air Force. I went in the Union Plaza Building and there was the Navy and the Marine Corps recruiting office, so we walked through and these two Marines standing out in front of there and I said, "Where's the Air Force recruiting office?" One of them said, "Air Force? Come inside and let us talk to you, here take this test." So I did and after a while they said, "Okay, you passed." This is right before Christmas and they said, "Next month you can come in, when do you want to go?" I said, "Well, not now, maybe next month." They said, "Good." So, during the holidays, I was like, "I'm not going anywhere," but I knew I had to. I went in the Marine Corps for four years and I think that's what really saved me.

- 01-00:25:16
Farrell: Before we get to your time in the Marine Corps, I kind of want to back up a little bit and ask you a few more questions. Your family had moved originally from Dallas, to the Bay Area. Was your father working in the Kaiser Shipyards in Richmond?
- 01-00:25:35
Demmons: I guess. I know he was working in Richmond.
- 01-00:25:38
Farrell: In Richmond, okay. And do you remember what he was doing?
- 01-00:25:42
Demmons: No, just other than welding or whatever he was doing.
- 01-00:25:44
Farrell: Welded, okay, okay.
- 01-00:25:45
Demmons: I guess. My mother worked there also.
- 01-00:25:47
Farrell: Oh she did, okay. And then, I mean the housing was segregated in Richmond. When you moved to San Francisco, did you have a similar sense of segregation at the time?
- 01-00:26:06
Demmons: Yes, of course. One of the things that happened in the elementary school, like I said, I was pretty good in math. I would finish my work, but I was never encouraged to get challenged more. I recall that one time, one of the teachers, she was asking everybody what their fathers, what type of work their father did, but she didn't ask any of the black kids that.
- 01-00:26:42
Farrell: What neighborhood in San Francisco were you in?
- 01-00:26:47
Demmons: I lived on Lyon, between McAllister and Fulton.
- 01-00:26:54
Farrell: Okay, so the Western Addition.
- 01-00:26:55
Demmons: In the Fillmore area.
- 01-00:26:56
Farrell: The Fillmore, okay, okay. You had talked about values and knowing right and wrong. Is that something that your mother had taught you?
- 01-00:27:08
Demmons: Yeah, and one of the things that really helped me later in life is I don't recall my parents allowing me—from time to time, I'd be at friends' houses. I never

recall them saying anything negative about white people or nothing like that, you know which, when I look back on it, I think that's what kind of helped me to look at people as individuals because I don't recall that. I recall my father relating a couple of incidents that he experienced but not to the point where he was indicating that he disliked folks like some of the stuff I heard from some of my friends' parents and stuff, from time to time.

One of the things that I somehow always did, when we lived in San Francisco, before we moved to Richmond, they said that I would be in front of the house we lived in on Sutter Street, and there were a lot of military people obviously in San Francisco. They said I would be out there talking to a lot of the sailors and soldiers that were going by, you know, and I was like four years old and I would be talking with them. So it seems as though all my friends seemed as though they were always older than me, like I said, then and definitely now. In fact, my wife commented, when we first met, she said, "You have all these old friends." I don't know, somehow I just gravitated towards older people. A lot of times, I would go to one of my friends in Oakland, I recall, when I'd go to his house, his grandfather lived with them and those guys would be either playing cards, whatever, you know, not sit down and talk to his grandfather. His grandfather always looked forward, it seemed like he looked forward to me being there, and we'd sit down and talk and he'd share stuff with me.

01-00:29:27

Farrell:

Yeah. So this is in the mid to late 1950s and the Civil Rights Movement is getting its start and taking root. Did you have a sense, at that point in time, at that age, about how things were going in San Francisco or the Bay Area in terms of the Civil Rights Movement taking hold, people becoming more aware of equality issues?

01-00:29:58

Demmons:

There were several incidents; you know you run into stuff. Kids know when you're not treating them right, and like I said, it became really obviously, more so when I went to integrated schools, than when I went to predominantly black schools, like McClymonds. You knew something wasn't right, but when you went to integrated schools, you saw. And most of the teachers were Caucasian, so you saw how they treated you in terms of how they treated other kids, and not only you, but other black kids in the class. I was aware of that and like I said, when I got expelled I didn't start the thing, you know, I tried to avoid it.

So, I guess what I was aware too, for instance at one point, my father showed me—this is when I lived in Oakland, near 36th Street, and one of my good friends was white. So, my father showed me how to make a shoeshine box, so I made one, and then I showed my friend how to make one and so we went downtown to try to earn money, you know, shining shoes. I said, "Well, let's go to the police station, those guys have to have their shoes shining all the time, shiny." So we went down there and the police officers that we ran into,

none of them had me shining shoes. They had him shining the shoes and they were kind of talking to him and kind of ignoring me, and this elderly black man, who was the janitor, he called me aside, he called me in the bathroom and he said, "Look, you get out of here and don't you come back down here," he said, "These guys will do stuff to you that you don't want them to do." I was about thirteen then, and so I left.

My next real encounter was when I was about fourteen, during those years. We were aware that blacks didn't live in Emeryville, cities that bordered, and blacks didn't live in San Leandro—you know it was segregated—blacks didn't live in Alameda. Blacks were concentrated in Oakland and some in South Berkeley. Me and about four or five of my friends, near 40th and San Pablo, in that area, they had a pool hall there and we went in the pool hall and we were shooting pool for about two or three hours. As soon as we left the pool hall, stepped outside, the entire Emeryville Police Department was there, pulling guns on us and accused us of robbing a liquor store. One of the police officers had a shotgun and he put it to my head like this, you know, about less than a foot from me. I was saying, "Well, you can talk to the guy in the pool hall." Later on, I figured out that he was the one that called the police, but I was telling him, "We've been in the pool hall the last two or three hours." He said, "Shut up, nigger, or keep talking so I can have an excuse to blow your head off." I was fourteen years old, okay?

One of the other incidents that I recall was when I was in high school and the circus came to Oakland, over near where Laney College is, they were set up over in that area. There were a lot of blacks, like I said, mostly in West Oakland. Oakland was predominantly black, I think, except for way out here this way. They had these two guys, and you've seen these circus, carnival things, where you throw a ball and knock one of them in the water? Well, one of them had blackface on and the other one, the pitch man I guess, was saying, "Give sambo a bath," you know. So, some of the guys started fighting, you know, and the whole carnival, for them to be that insensitive, to do something like that in that kind of structure. When we finally got a television, I watched some of the things that were happening in the South, you know, in almost real-time, and it really affected me, like I said, because I guess I was brought up not to mistreat people and that's what one of the things that saved me.

Like I said, I went into the Marine Corps and the first year, I had a temper. There was one other black in my platoon and they made him a fire team leader, which is in charge of like three other people and in boot camp, they really put you through it. I hadn't slept like in days, so after breakfast I was sitting on my footlocker and I guess I had half dozed off. The next thing I know, the only other black guy in the platoon had grabbed me and said, "What are you doing?" I hadn't been getting much sleep, and so I woke up and he told the other guys, "Get out of here, I'm going to teach this man some discipline." So he swung on me and I was beating him up pretty bad and one of the drill instructors came in, and the guy was pretty bloody and stuff and he

told him to go around and clean up. But I would fight, just I wouldn't argue with people. I recall coming home on leave on the bus and looking at my knuckles and said, "My mother is going to say, 'You're doing the same thing in there that you were doing before,'" and I was embarrassed. So, after being in the Marine Corps, after that first year, I realized that some of my peers were promoting up and I saw how different Marines that outranked other Marines could take advantage of them and do things to them and the other Marines, if they did anything back, they wound up in the brig. So, I said, "I have to use this—(points to his head)—not this [fists]." I sort of grew up in there and I learned to control my temper after that first year.

In boot camp, we have three drill instructors in charge of us; one senior and two juniors. One of the junior drill instructors, he was the one that came in there and broke up the fight and for some reason he took a liking to me. They told me that after we took the first written test, that I had scored the highest on the written test. Then I found out later that my best friend was in boot camp and one of the other drill instructors sort of took a liking to him because I guess they both were small. So, we were on the rifle range and that's one of the big things, then what you do is qualify. This drill instructor came to me when I was getting ready to shoot and says, "Your friend went over the hill he said because he didn't qualify, and he ran over the hill." That kind of shook me up, like I said, and so I was capable of shooting expert, but I wound up just qualifying as a marksman because that kind of shook me up and I couldn't focus on what I was doing. I found out later that if I had shot expert, that I would have been the honor man because I had done so well in all the other areas.

Later on, after I went over to Okinawa in Japan for most of the stuff and I got back to the States, by that time I had really made up my mind that I was going to do the best I could while I was in there. So, I went into a regiment, the 5th Marine Regiment. The 5th and 6th are the two most decorated regiments in the Marine Corps and they're supposed to be the most gung-ho-like. I was a fire team leader and I had been promoted to lance corporal and my squad leader, they found marijuana in his locker so they put me as the temporary squad leader at the time because they left me there. So I was like the lowest ranking squad leader in that regiment or maybe in the whole division, I don't know. But we had our division, we had competition, squad competitions, so I took my squad and we won the regimental thing, but they mixed the squad up later when they were doing the division competition, I think, and that was mainly because they felt the generals or whoever was judging, that they weren't going to judge my squad fairly, but they all thought that I deserve it and I sort of built up a reputation as being a Marine's Marine while I was in there.

One of the things that happened was there was a sergeant major and it turned out he was from Daly City. Like I said, everybody in the regiment knew me, I had that reputation. I used to march the platoon to lunch and dinner and all

that, and they would really put out hard for me. He sent me and one other guy to Washington, D.C., for small arms repair, because one of the things, my sergeant, platoon sergeant, they were planning on going back overseas and he really wanted me to go back too, and he really looked to me, you know, to help train the other Marines, the younger ones. I was young too but you know, younger than me anyway, in the service.

He sort of got upset because I started playing football. And it was interesting, I told you I went to Tech. I had another friend, we went out for the football team and during junior high, I couldn't wait to high school to try to play football and the first day the coach came out, and the other guy was bigger than me and he said, "You and you, too small, get the hell out of here." Didn't even try and it was white guys that stayed out there, that were smaller than my friend. So that was sort of disheartening but I kind of felt proud of myself when I made the team in the Marine Corps, competing with people that played not only high school but some of them had played college football too. So, my sergeant was upset about that, because they were spending a lot of time training and I would go to practice, but the captain that was in charge of it, the football team, so they knew I wasn't going to go back overseas and they all thought that I was going to be in the Marine Corps for thirty years. At least, that's the feeling they got.

So, I went to small arms repair school and I moved out of the regiment, to a support facilities and from there, my last six months, they transferred me to Yuma, Arizona. I was supposed to take over the armory. When I got there, on the way there, there was one other Marine that was transferred at the same time I was for another position and he had a motorcycle, but he lived in Southern California and he told me that he was going to use his father's car to drive from Camp Pendleton to Yuma and that I could go with him. He was going to leave early and then he was going to drive the car back and then get his motorcycle, after he took his clothes and stuff in the car. But he said we'd have to leave early, before we were scheduled to check in, and so we went and we checked in—he took the car and came back and we checked in the hotel. So, he came to my room and he said, "Well, let's go have a beer," and I just turned twenty-one, you know, he was too, and I said, "Okay, I'll meet you downstairs; I'll be down in a minute." So when I went down to the bar, he was drinking a beer, so I ordered a beer, and the bartender said, "I'm sorry." I thought oh, he thinks I'm not twenty-one, and so I showed him my ID, and he said no, he said, "Oh no, that's not it." He said, "I can't serve you because you're black, you're a Negro." And so my friend, he kind of went off, you know? So that was my real taste of being in the segregated, real segregated. It surprised me, because Yuma is right on the border, and I think Phoenix wasn't like that, but Yuma, Arizona was right there.

So, they didn't put me in the armory, they put me in the military police and I didn't care for that, you know, because a lot of things, a lot of reasons. The interesting thing about that was that you couldn't, if you—the blacks that were

in the military, we couldn't go on patrol in town because we weren't allowed to go in the white establishments, but all the other Marines could. And so, I made the unit Marine of the month and all that stuff and like I said, "They all thought that I was going to be in that," because I really applied myself. It was interesting, which normally didn't happen, but the base exec, the number two officer on the base, called me in for my reenlistment, and so when I told him that I wasn't reenlisting, he laughed because he thought I was joking. Like I said, they all thought that I was in there forever, you know. So, I just related some of my experiences in there and particularly when somebody don't like you because of their race and they outrank you, they can do a lot of things to you, and that was something that, you know, and so I left the Marine Corps.

01-00:47:22

Farrell:

What had originally attracted you to the Marine Corps?

01-00:47:30

Demmons:

Well I guess, like I said, I wanted to go in the Air Force and my stepbrother, he had gone in the Marine Corps, but unfortunately, he had been dishonorably discharged. He left because I guess they had him stationed too close to home or whatever. When I finally decided to go in there it was because I didn't know what to do. I had been put out of school. My brother in-law, he was going to Hill studying engineering, He was doing stuff to get me to go to Hill, you know. So I just felt really bad because I felt like I had been put out and was being denied an education, because I didn't do anything to be put in that position, and people had done stuff to me. Other than like I said, I said some things to that teacher when she said that, you know, which I shouldn't have done but I guess I just lost it and she left out of the room. And maybe rather than expelling me, they could have suspended me or something, I don't know what they're going to, but it was just like we don't care about you, that's what message I received from that.

You had asked me too, about growing up and a lot of things I was doing. I always had good work ethic. The first job I had, I was nine years old, working here in San Francisco at the corner store on Lyon and McAllister, Dick's Market. It was two stores, side-by-side. He had me stocking shelves and stuff, and I think because he recognized my honesty, I guess he didn't worry about me stealing and stuff like that. So I worked there. And then later, I sold newspapers on the corner in San Francisco. During those days, they used to have people selling newspapers on the corner, so I sold newspapers on the corner. The first one was on Divisadero and Fulton. There used to be a night club right there on the corner and I sold newspapers there. And then on 9th Avenue, where you go into the aquarium, where the Delancey Street Restaurant used to be, there was another restaurant, and I sold newspapers on the corner there. One of the things I recall about that was there was a kid that lived up the street and from time to time he'd come down and start, "Look at the chocolate Hershey boy," and just give me a rough time. And then he'd run home. That was before I moved from San Francisco; that's when I was about

ten and eleven, nine. Even though I was doing all this other stuff with Napoleon and them, I still was selling newspapers.

When I moved to Oakland, I had a couple of paper routes; I delivered papers. At one point, when I was about fourteen, I used to walk from 36th Street, down to 10th Street, and they used to have these buses that used to take people out to pick beans and stuff like that. Generally, they wouldn't let kids go out there but I had a reputation. They would let me go out and so during the summer, I would walk from 36th Street down early in the morning, get on a bus, go out all day somewhere down there and pick beans. A lot of my friends, they were hanging out in the park, Mosswood Park, and doing whatever they were doing, but none of them wanted to go do that. It wasn't easy, but I guess it opened my eyes to, like I said, the adults who were out there earning a living. I knew I didn't want to earn a living doing that, you know, and so that kind of helped me kind of get focused on what I wanted to do. Like I said, I also delivered newspapers, so I always had pretty good work ethic.

01-00:52:12

Farrell:

When you decided to leave the Marine Corps, what were you thinking about doing after? What were your career aspirations at that point?

01-00:52:24

Demmons:

Well, you know, I knew a friend of my father's; he was in real estate and he had bought up a lot of houses. I'd hear him and my father talking. So, when my brother in-law talked me into going to school because I couldn't find a job and I was really frustrated, and people at that time said states that you couldn't go to school and collect unemployment, but I was entitled to unemployment because I had been in the Marine Corps. That's what I was told when I went to the unemployment office at the time. Like I said, the way I was raised, my stepmother said a lot of negative things about me, but one thing she said was that I was honest. I didn't want to do it, even though I didn't have a job.

So, one of the things that happened was that my brother in-law and sister, they lived over by City College. At the time, he was still going to Hill's College himself because he had been in the Army and they came and he was studying engineering. He was saying, "You should go over there to City College." He had a friend that was going to City College. He said, "Go over there to City College. You know you need to go to City College because it will increase your opportunity to maybe get a job." So I was getting frustrated. I had spent four years in the service to this country and I know I'm being discriminated against. It's almost like some of the people were throwing my application in the wastebasket before I left out. I would tell him and he'd say, "Go get an application over there," and I said okay. Like I said, he knew me, had known me since I was eleven years old, so he knew something was going on. He sat me down one day and he said, "Look, let me explain something to you." He says, "The kids coming out of school, your life experience, not only in the Marine Corps, but your life experience will put you not only even with them,

it will put you ahead of them. Don't be intimidated by going over there." I said, "All right." So what happened, he had his friend bring an application, so I went down and he said, "Sit down and fill this application out." So I did, and I started City College.

But during that time before I started, I got frustrated and I was down at the—like I said, at the time, they called it the unemployment office. They had this man, I guess he must have been in his fifties or something, and he was like the manager in charge, so I went there and I said, "What's going on?" I said, "I've been coming down here all this time, looking for a job," and I said, "I know something's going on around here." He said, "Son, let me tell you, you're right." He said, "I know people are discriminating against you because you're black, or Negro," he says, "and I can't do nothing about it." Some of these employers will tell him, "Don't send no Negroes over here," and they do that. I was really feeling down; I was really feeling frustrated. He said, "Best advice I can give you is you should go back to school," and he says, "Because you'll still face discrimination but you won't face as much as you do without an education."

So now I had two people telling me [to go to college], so I did. I went to my first semester at City College. Then my brother in-law told me, "Well, you're good in math, you ought to study engineering." Well, you can't take engineering courses until you pass a test, so when I first went there and I had been out of school so long that I didn't do well on the math test, they put me like in bonehead math class. But the first quarter, if you pass the test again, they'll get you out of there. So I did and I really started working hard. I got out and I started taking classes. When I first started, I took the pre-engineering test, and I said, "What is this stuff?" For that year, I really jammed myself and I went to summer school. It was interesting that after that. I was making out my schedule and I put a couple of engineering classes down and my counselor says, "You know, you can't take those engineering classes until you pass a test." I said, "Well, I'm going to take the test now and I hope to pass it," and she said, "Most of the people don't pass it." She was just discouraging me and I said "If I take it and I fail it, does that mean I can't take it again?" She said, "Oh no, you can take it again," and I said "Well, I want to take it." I said, "Meanwhile, I'll do my classes." She was doing everything she could to discourage me. It was interesting; when I took the test, I knew I passed it because I knew the stuff on there. I had learned it, just in that one year. When I went to see her she was like, "Oh, you passed the test!" Like she's celebrating. "And not only did you pass it, you passed in the top three percent of the people that passed it!" She was giving me all this stuff. I said, "Okay, can you just okay my classes?"

So I did it and during the time, I had to stop for a while because I got married. My last semester at City College, I had one son that was three years old and my wife was pregnant with my second son. In fact, I tell him all the time that I thank him for waiting until I took my last final before he came. He was born

on June fifteenth. At one point, my last semester—I still don't know how I was doing it—I had two full-time jobs, three part-time jobs and I was taking the highest math they taught, advanced calculus, and differential equations, organic chemistry, physics, and a business course. I was taking a real estate course. I was doing all that. I was working—fortunately. I had gone to work for the phone company and when they gave me the test, I was the last one that they called in. I took the test and found out that I had scored pretty high. And so the guy was asking me what did I want to do with my life and this and that, and I said, "I'm going to school, so whatever I do I can work at night." He said, "Well, the only thing we have at night is building services." I said, "Okay that's fine," and he said, "You don't mind doing that?" I said, "No, it's honest work." And so they hired me. They started really trying to groom me to be a manager; I can remember them doing that.

I'm jumping way ahead. When I was looking for a job, eventually, the friend I met at City College, his next door neighbor was a janitor for the city, and so he got me on as a temporary janitor at the Hall of Justice. I was working there, they liked my work, so they kept me working. Then I left there and I was working at city hall as a temporary janitor. I'm trying to remember how I took a test for a watchman for the city. I passed that and I got hired as a watchman in the Veterans, in the Opera House, I worked there. I was working as a watchman and at the phone company, and I told my boss that I had to leave the phone company. I didn't tell him I had another job, but I told him I had to work different hours, and he says okay. The next day he came and he said, "Oh, we're going to move you to Bush Street where you can work the hours you want because we don't want you to leave and stuff." I said, "Well, I want to leave," because I was working the two jobs. Like I said, those were the two jobs I was working at, and obviously, as a watchman, I could doze off a little bit and do homework.

My brother in-law, him and his friend had started this janitorial business, and so in between classes, he would have me go bid on jobs. He had a bowling alley that we cleaned up a couple of times a week, and so he wanted me to do that. Then he had a place where they print, a printing place, but they printed out a lot of checks, and he didn't trust anybody in there other than me, so those were three part-time jobs I had, and then the two full-time, and I was married. Before that, I had dropped out of school for a while and I went back and so forth, and so it took me quite a while. Plus, I had to make up for a lot of the classes that I didn't take in high school when I was goofing off, you know.

So, I graduated and I went to Berkeley. When I was at Berkeley, I was still doing that and I wasn't studying and I wasn't doing things, so after a while, I just had to leave. In the meantime, that summer, one of my brother in-laws was looking for a job, and so like I said, by that time I had quit the phone company. My brother in-law was looking for a job and so I was taking him around, and we went down to PG&E [Pacific Gas & Electric] and I thought

well, I'm going to take one. So, they called me a few days later and they didn't call him; they called me. The test they had given me was for like gas service, and that's a promotional provision, you have to be working with PG&E but they were short, so they were trying to get people. That was the exam that they gave me. I guess they were pretty impressed because it was an exam where you weren't supposed to finish and I only had one more question by the time they called time. The funny thing about it was the foreman from the service was down there with the human resources person and the two of them had me in a room and they were asking me, "Do you like—" because they were just looking at my educational background and a couple of guys that got hired were airplane mechanics that had gotten laid off or something. They were asking me, "Do you like working with cars and stuff?" I said, "No, I don't like to hit my knuckles and stuff." I wasn't giving them the right answers. So, they offered me a job and I went to school to learn how to do it. I was doing that and I was still working as a watchman, doing both jobs. After about a year or so, I was talking with my foreman and they interviewed me for an estimating and engineering position, and plus PG&E would send you to school too, let you go to school. I said, "Well, I'm going to go back to school, pay attention, finish up my engineering degree." So I had made up my mind to do that.

In the meantime, I took the test for the fire department and the way that came about was this guy Taylor, he was the elevator operator, African American. The other African Americans who worked there, they were all janitors, and so I was the watchman, when I was going to school, and the director, according to the organizational chart, I was supposed to report directly to the director, not the assistant director. The director sort of took an interest in me because in large fact, I was going to school. A couple of times, like one night, they had a reception in the veterans building prior to the opera, and the people that worked there came in, the caterers, they were taking care for the coat checks. They had left the buildings open, everything open, and here are all these fur coats in there, sable coats and things. I couldn't believe it, so I locked it up, went over to the opera house and told him, "I put them in, locked them up." He kind of liked that. A few times, people left safes open and I reported it and I told them they needed to be more careful and stuff like that. Another time, some guy broke the window out in front and I chased him and caught him down the street and held him for the police. So you know, so he took a liking to me.

So anyway, this guy Taylor, he used to always go over to City Hall—they used to post all the job announcements and he would go over there all the time. He brought one application back once and it was for a museum guard, which paid more than a watchman. He said, "Here, Bob." So I took that test and I came out number one on the list. He said, "Wow," and he brought me one for park patrolman. I took that and I came out number three on the list. I didn't take either one of those jobs because I was comfortable where I was, being able to do what I want, studying. So my boss, the director, knew that I

was spending a lot of time studying and stuff and as long as I punched the clock he was happy. He knew I was still taking care of the building and doing stuff.

One day he brought the application over for the fire department and he said, "Oh Bob, you ought to get in the fire department." He said, "Those firemen don't do anything but sit around and play cards all day." He said, "You can do your homework, and look how much money they make." It was interesting, I filled out the application and it was the last day—it had to be turned in by midnight that day—and I was coming from Berkeley and I was on my way to work. I was debating on whether I was going to get off the freeway and go down and drop it off at the Post Office so it would be postmarked by the deadline. I almost didn't, but I did. I took the exam and I got a notice that I had passed the exam. Shortly after that, WACO [Western Addition Community Organization], that's when they filed a suit. Immediately, I said, "Exam discriminate? What's wrong? What are you talking about?" All of a sudden I caught myself. I said, "Now, had I taken that exam before I went to City College and all that, I wouldn't have passed it probably." I said the requirements for the job is high school or equivalent, not two years of college, taking the courses that I took, you know. So, to tell you the truth, I was really proud of myself that I was able to recognize that.

Later, we went through and they gave us a second exam and all that. On the first one, he took me through for the physical agility and you know, I was in the Marine Corps and stuff, and I didn't have no problem with the physical stuff. I can do a lot of pull-ups and one of the things that I found was that I saw, at first I recall watching one of the applicants, he could only do three. Later in life, I looked back on it and I said, "He must have known somebody," because the next thing I know, they lowered the requirements to a minimum of three.

01-01:11:50

Farrell:

Pull-ups?

01-01:11:51

Demmons:

Yeah, and I could do about twenty-something. When I was taking the physical agility the first time, you had to touch your toes, bend, and then touched the wall, like that. I could rip off a lot of those. The guy that was proctor, they had hired—I don't know, they would hire like college students—and the guy that was watching me, what they said was that if you bend your knees, the proctor is supposed to say no during the counting, instead of saying the numbers. Saying, "No, knees," to let you know. Well this guy spoke real soft, you know you couldn't hear him. When I didn't hear anything, I just kept going. So, he didn't give me credit for like about fifteen of them. They said that I didn't pass. I raised it with the Civil Service person in charge, Don {Pistolesi?}. I said, "Well, he didn't tell me knees. If he'd have told me knees, I would have straightened up. He just let me keep going." He said, "Well, how many do you

think you did?" I said, "Well, I know how many I'd do when I would practice." It was interesting, this other applicant, he was African American, was saying, "Well you had your knees bent." And that's when he said, well see, see, and so he let it go. After the suit and everybody had to take the stuff all over again. I passed the written again and whatever they did, you know, it wasn't the same. I think it was pass, fail, whatever they did with the written and physical agility.

When they called me for my interview, after I finished the interview—it was at City Hall, so I went across the street to the Veterans Building and saw the director. I said, "Hey," because any time he'd see me he'd say, "Come on in, Bob." He said, "What's going on?" I said, "I just took the interview for the fire department." "Why didn't you tell me?" I'm like, "What are you talking about?" He gets on the phone and he called the chief of the fire department, "Yeah, this is Joe. One of my people just took the test, who the people who did it?" I'm sitting there like what the heck is going on? So, Andy Casper, who later became chief, at the time he was Battalion Chief, and they had this program, this FST program. I don't know if you heard about that. That was sort of like a seed program. The Federal Government funded so many positions and they were going through the same stuff. They were going through training and you'd help pass a test. So, Casper was saying, during the night at City College, where you could go and you could train for the physical agility. So he said, "I'll ask the guys if you can come down during the day." What they were doing, they were sending the guys who done so many hours in the firehouse, and they were treating them pretty bad. I know one of them, I saw him at the hamburger place near the fire station and I said, "I thought you guys ate in the firehouse?" He said, "They do," but they wouldn't let him eat.

There was one white guy, a Samoan, and two Asians, and I think all the rest of them were black. There was about seventeen of them and they gave them special badges. But the interesting thing about that was that—and then they was teaching them math. The funny thing about that is, a lot of those guys had college educations. What happened was, a lot of times when they have special programs like that, a lot of the people in the black community that are politically active and stuff, they are aware of this stuff, and oftentimes, they don't really get down to the grassroots people; the information doesn't get there. They target their relatives, friends, kids and stuff, into these programs. That was something I found really interesting, that some of these guys were highly educated, and like I said before, the '70s, you didn't even need high school in order to get in the department. They'd have them like shining the brass, you know doing stuff like that around the firehouses, and really kind of looked down on them, you know.

01-01:17:26

Farrell:

Yeah.

01-01:17:29

Demmons:

So, I worked out with those guys. After the second suit there was an age limit requirement and you couldn't be thirty-four or over. During that period, I had essentially given up on the fire department and so, like I said, I was at PG&E. I got a call and I'm sure the only reason I got the call was because the person had talked with Casper. Casper had—it was some of the guys that were going past the age by the time the suit was settled and they were petitioning the judge to waive it. So they, I guess looked good having me involved in it, through the African Americans, a couple of others. I got a call from one of the guys that was involved in that, and I know he got my number from Casper. When I was scheduled to start, I was really not sure I wanted to go in. One of the foremen at PG&E, he wasn't my foreman but he was one, we went to breakfast in Alameda one Saturday morning and I told him what was going on. I said, "I really don't know whether I want to leave PG&E and go in the fire department or what." He said, "Well, you won't be able to go in the fire department later because of your age." He says, "But, you can always come back to PG&E." So I went in, but I took vacation for that two weeks and I said I wanted to see what it's like and stuff. It was stressful but I decided to do that, with the understanding that I could go in there. My plan at that time was to stay in there for two years, go back to school, and things happened.

01-01:20:02

Farrell:

What was the amount of time between when you took the first test and then the second test?

01-01:20:09

Demmons:

I think the first test was around 1971, I believe. The second one was probably '73 at the latest. In fact, like I said, all these boxes, I have a lot of that information in there. I don't know if I should be doing this on the camera.

01-01:20:37

Farrell:

Oh, it's okay.

01-01:20:38

Demmons:

Did you ever get a copy of this?

01-01:20:41

Farrell:

No, I didn't. I did not.

01-01:20:43

Demmons:

Okay, that's a pretty good history, a brief history, and I'll let you have that copy; I made it yesterday.

01-01:20:48

Farrell:

Oh, and I can make a copy and bring it back next time.

01-01:20:52

Demmons:

I have another copy.

- 01-01:20:53
Farrell: Oh you do? Thank you.
- 01-01:20:54
Demmons: Yeah, I made that for you.
- 01-01:20:55
Farrell: Thank you. Yeah, I will definitely read it.
- 01-01:20:58
Demmons: There's some other stuff, I guess, before the next interview that I can maybe dig up for you.
- 01-01:21:02
Farrell: Okay, that would be great. This is really helpful. So when you—because we'll get into some more of this I think in the next sessions—can you tell me a little bit about that two-week period, where you were on vacation from PG&E and you were deciding whether or not the fire department was going to work?
- 01-01:21:25
Demmons: Right. Well, see I've never been one to easily give up on stuff, you know, and during those two weeks, I guess the thing was one, the challenge, and then I saw some things that weren't right in there going on. One of the things I noticed that particularly, some of the individuals who were going through had relatives in the fire department and sometimes, when the firefighters would come down, the ones on the engine truck would come down, and we would use the apparatus for training, some of them knew the guys and was saying, "Hey, I talked to your dad the other day," and I'm watching this. They used to put us in the tower and they would tell us not to look out the window when other people were being tested. I didn't see it, but a couple of guys, one in particular—he and I became real close—he said he looked out the window and one of the guys, what you call a make and break, where they—you have to hook up different hose lines, you know, leads and stuff, and a couple of them, right and all that. He said he looked out there and he saw this guy hadn't finished.
- We tested on Friday. On Monday, he had a perfect score. Not only that, what happened, we'd be in the tower on Friday at the test and some of the guys said, "Oh I messed up on this or I messed up on that," and then you look at their scores on Monday and they had perfect scores. So we knew, the blacks in the class, we knew that things weren't right. I was doing pretty good in there because I didn't get deficiencies and stuff, but the first deficiencies I got was like on the parts. They had a big table with all these different couplings and parts and that's something you can't take home and practice. You needed, I think four or five, if you got four or five that was it, five, six, whatever it was. I got two deficiencies on that, so I knew that I deserved that, but the class, just about everyone in the class was getting seven to eight at that time, and if you got twelve, you had to go see the deputy. I had those two that I know I deserved and there was only two other people that had less than maybe seven

or eight. One was Jim Ahern, who later became President of the union. He had uncles and father in the department. The other one was Welcher, Don Welcher, who had been in the Daly City Fire Department. He was African American, but he was—I mean, everybody knew he was sharp as a tack on stuff. I was like the third person and we had forty-eight people in the class.

So, we had the Scott Air Pak test and I don't know if you've been in the tower, but there's like a leather lift, we call it a man lift, that you grab on, it takes you up and you pull the thing and it moves up or down, and you stand on a little metal thing. I was on the second floor—that's where they were giving their test—and they said they didn't want you to see what you were going to be tested on. This training officer, what he did was, I was in the middle of being tested, and one of the other lieutenants hollered, "Man coming up!" He told me to stop and he said, "Stand over here, where he can't see you, so he can't see what you're doing." So I stood over, and the guy, the other Probe rode up, passed. When he passed, he said, "Okay, finish," so I finished. When I went downstairs, because obviously you're nervous, it's stressful. I said, "Wait a minute." He kept timing me when I was standing over in the corner and so I went down and I wasn't thinking much about it and I said, "Lieutenant." I said, "You kept timing me when that guy was going." He said, "No I didn't." I guess part of it is they wanted to be perfect because in their eyes the minorities and stuff weren't perfect. He said, "No I didn't." He said, "I stopped it and then I started it." I know he didn't because I was watching, and so I said I'll wait.

That Monday, I had three more deficiencies. I went to the captain and I said, "Why did I get those three deficiencies?" He said, "Wait a minute, I'll check." He said, "Because you took too much time on the Scott." See, one of the things that kind of helped me was when I got in the fire department, they knew that I knew Joe Allen, and I think that's what—so anyway, I started arguing with him and I said, "Well, the lieutenant has to change it." He says, "I can't change it." I'm still thinking well, he'll change it, but I wasn't sure because of the way he acted.

01-01:27:32

Farrell:
Demmons:

Mm-hmm.

I went to him and I said, "Lieutenant." I said, "You did keep timing me." "No I didn't!" I started almost losing it. I started arguing back, which I could have been fired right then. This friend of mine that I told you had looked out the window, he passed by because he heard all this going on and he knew I was about to lose it. It was one of the things that he and I used to talk about—we both used to enjoy some of the stuff Richard Pryor used to say, and one of the things that Richard Pryor, in one of his jokes, he talks about how the police stopped him because he's black, and made him do all these different things. And then he stopped a white guy and he said, "Oh Timmy, how are you

doing? Are you going bowling Saturday night?" So Jimmie passed by and he just said, "Are you going bowling Saturday night?" I kind of snapped out of it. In other words, he's letting me know, he said, "Come on now, Bob. You know you're going to be treated differently." So, I kind of caught myself and I guess that kind of saved my job because I wasn't ready to back down. That's what I wound up with, five, and just about everybody, other than the other two people, wound up with about twelve deficiencies. There was a big gap. So that was it. I don't know how much more you want me to go.

01-01:29:14

Farrell:

Well, why did you end up deciding to stay?

01-01:29:19

Demmons:

Well, like I said, when I found out what the job was like at first I was going to leave after two years. That was in '74. What happened was I started learning more about the job and I guess that was part of my Marine Corps training, that you try to learn as much about your job because they don't play. You have to learn everything about your job, your equipment and everything, and so that's what I started doing. The first thing I did was they put me in two of the slowest houses in the city. I guess I learned from that, try to slow me down. They sent this other guy, African American. We both went to the slowest house in the city, for forty-something people, and we noticed that some of the guys that had relatives and they had potential they thought, they sent them to the busiest houses, the busiest stations. At that time, to make a station with seniority, you had to have about twenty-something years because guys during those years would stay in thirty years, forty years, you know. They would stay in one house and they would bid on another tour in the same station to block that spot, and then a vacant spot. They would pick somebody that they want and they'd bring them in, mostly on a temporary basis, but they would be there. That's how they did it.

They had thirteen stations where they had chief officers, ten battalion chief stations and three divisions. They had spots reserved for chief operators, the chief's aides, that could bid on those and a lot of people didn't want to be a chief aide. One thing, because you have to fill out a lot of reports and a lot of paperwork and stuff, that's what you do. I knew that I wanted to go to a busy station and so there were two stations that I wanted to go to; one was 7 and 38. 38 was the biggest station in the city at the time because #3 truck were there—they were building a new station for them and they were being housed in Station 38.

01-01:32:16

Farrell:

I see.

01-01:32:17

Demmons:

They had the truck there, they had one of the two rescue squads there, the engine company was there, the service squad was there, water rescue unit was there, and a battalion chief. We had twenty-one people working every day

there. I looked at it and I said, "Okay, if I go there from time to time, I'll get to work on these other apparatus and learn about them and stuff." That's what I wanted to do because I was frustrated because I had been in a year and they put me in these stations where, you know, very seldom we moved and stuff. In fact, my second station, the truck, they put it out of service. Truck 20, they eventually put it out of service it was so inactive. So, what I did was, in order to be a chief's operator, you have to learn Morse code because the boxes, the fire alarm boxes?

01-01:33:15

Farrell:

Yeah.

01-01:33:16

Demmons:

They had telegraph keys in there and years ago, that's how they used to communicate. But that's one of the requirements you had to do. So I went to Radio Shack or whatever, and got me a key, and I found out later in life that I'm tone deaf, you know, certain tones, sounds and words and stuff, I don't pick up, distinguish. But I was practicing, I kept practicing. They had this operator that you had to go see and then he'd check you out first and then once he says it's okay, then you go down to see the Bureau of Electricity, you know, and they would send you out to one of the boxes on the corner and they would communicate to you. This guy Ray Mode was the operator and he was at Station 7. The interesting thing about that was Paul Tabacco, he was at Station 7, and he was in my class. He said, "Bob." He says, "You want to be an operator? Why do you want to be an operator?" He's giving me all this negative stuff, you don't want to be an operator. Later on, Ray Balzarini, who was in our class also, and I was telling Ray about it, he says, "Oh Bob, Paul is full of it." He said he had been down there because that's where Ray was. He said he had been down there studying to be an operator and so he just didn't want me to have more seniority than him. I said, "Paul." I said, "I know I can't trust you Paul, from now on." So he got passed up as operator and so when I went down there—and keep in mind, this is before I got involved with the Black Firefighters [Association].

So he was giving me—sending me stuff, and I was writing it down, trying to write it down. I said, "Oh Ray, oh no." He said, "Bob, look what you have down there." He says, "Look at the words." He says, "There's only a couple of letters missing out of each word. You know what the words are, just fill them in." I said, "Oh, okay." So I went and I got tested. That's funny because when I went to the—and it was kind of windy too, and cold, and so the guy in electricity was sending that stuff like—I said, "What in the world?" I'm writing it down and finally he sent me a message that said, "Congratulations, you passed." I said, "Thanks, goodbye." [Laughter] The interesting thing was when I put in for station, when I turned my request in to make the spot, I did it the last afternoon that they had to be turned in. See, if I hadn't done that they would have had somebody with more seniority to block me. Then they didn't

have time to lock me out of there, and so I made Station 38, in a chief operator spot.

01-01:36:34

Farrell: Well, I think that's probably a good place to leave it for today. When we come back next time, kind of get a little bit more of that. Thank you.

01-01:36:41

Demmons: I don't know if I said anything that made any sense today.

01-01:36:44

Farrell: No you did, absolutely. Thank you so much.

01-01:36:45

Demmons: You wouldn't kid me now.

01-01:36:47

Farrell: I'm not, no.

Interview 2: July 25, 2016

02-00:00:13

Farrell:

Okay, this is Shanna Farrell with Robert Demmons on July 25, 2016 and we're in Oakland, California. Robert, when we left off last time we were talking about coming into the fire department and being trained. I know that you've moved up the ranks quite a bit, but could you tell me a little bit more about your training and your progression through the department?

02-00:00:43

Demmons:

Well, as I stated before, I was really debating whether to come into the fire department and leave PG&E [Pacific Gas & Electric Company] because I had sort of settled in with PG&E. I had an opportunity to move into the area that I was really interested in, which was engineering. One of the primary reasons that I did make a decision to stay with the fire department was at the time, I felt that by being in the fire department, I can control my own destiny. I felt that if I studied and prepared myself, I could promote up through the ranks because they gave examination, as opposed to PG&E and a lot of other companies, where it depends on how your superiors feel about you and whether you should get promoted or not. So that was one of the real reasons and that's why I was so disappointed and devastated when I found out that the tests weren't all on the up and up.

When I came in the department, I've always wanted to really make sure I knew what my job was and I've always had a lot of drive to do whatever I could to do the best job I could. It was interesting to me, that when I look back over my life, that it seems as though I always was involved in some type of service position. When I worked for the phone company, I was in building service, PG&E, gas service, you know going out and turning people's gas on. When I was in the National Guard, again, military service, in the Marine Corps, military service. I didn't really think about it that much until a few years ago, what I have done with my life.

When I got in the department, one of the first things I wanted to do was make a busy fire station because they had been targeting me to slow stations and how that works is—I'll give you an example. If two individuals come in the department on the same day and you send one to a station where they're getting five times as many fires and incidents as the other, then what you say is that after one year, you can almost say that the person has five times more experience than the other one in the slower station. One of the other advantages of working in the busy stations generally would be consultants. When they're developing examinations, they'll go to the chief and ask for subject matter experts and the chief normally picked those individuals from the busy stations. If there is no consistency in your operating procedures, then that can really affect the outcome of the exam, which I was able to find out later. For instance, I'll give you an example. At one point, I noticed that out of the top fifty people on a promotional examination, over forty of the first fifty of them came from just five of the forty-something fire stations. I noticed that

all five of those stations had individuals that participated in the construction of the examination. Later on, I was involved in the chair, in the Standard Operating Procedure Committee, because I wanted to establish consistency in our operational duties. Prior to that, how you operated at a fire often depended not only on which fire station you worked in, but what shift oftentimes because different company officers and things, or battalion chiefs or whatever, had different ways of doing things.

So that was one of the things and so the first thing I wanted to do was to make a busy station. So during that period, it's all based on seniority. When you bid on vacancies in a station, and during those early years, a lot of individuals stayed in the fire department forty years, you know, so it was really hard to make what you call a good or busy station. Obviously, some people don't want to work in a busy station but I did because I wanted to learn. There's chief operator spots in the thirteen stations that have chief officers stationed there; the ten battalions, there were ten battalions, and the three divisions, and you are sort of an administrative assistant to the chief that works in that station. They have spots reserved for relief operators so that in case the regular operators—permanent operator—is off duty for whatever reason, you can fill in that spot. At the time, you had to learn Morse code in order to become a chiefs operator and a lot of the firefighters really didn't want that job because you're required to do a lot of reports, write reports for the chiefs and all that. One of the other advantages of that job, depending on what chief you're driving, but you get to go in the fires and assess what's going on. Company officers all have radios now but they didn't at the time, so you had to go in and report what was going on. Again, that was an excellent learning opportunity that I felt.

The other thing, I wanted to make a busy house that had several apparatus so that I could get a chance to work on the other apparatus, even on a temporary basis. If someone is not there and you were over, you could work on that apparatus for that shift, that twenty-four hour shift. That's why I wanted to go there. I knew too, that there were a lot of influences in terms of trying to—people wanted to keep their friends and control who they work with, so they would manipulate things. They would make sure that they had somebody with seniority, even if it was in the same station, they would change to another shift just to block somebody out. I knew that and so I turned in my application that afternoon, on the last day that they had to be turned in. So, I was able to make a busy station, Station 38. At the time, Station 38 had a reputation of not being a good environment, for not only minorities but even some white firefighters that they didn't want to work there, and it was a battalion station also.

I made Station 38 and I went there and obviously knew the job, but there was one chief that I worked with a lot and his operators told me that the chief wasn't particular about me driving him. But, I still got to drive in other places, in vacation spots and stuff like that, for several years.

The next thing I wanted to do was—I went to a fire and there was a little toddler and she died. That, and looking at some of the other situations where I went, I saw people with medical conditions. About 70 percent of the calls that firefighters make are for medical calls and I wanted to learn more about how to take care of people medically. At the time, the only members of the fire department that were interested in EMT [emergency medical technician] training were those that wanted to work on one of the two rescue squads. So I think that the members thought that because one of the rescue squads was there, at Station 38 where I worked, I guess they thought I wanted—that's why I was taking EMT, and it wasn't, because I really wasn't looking to work on the rescue squad permanently, or even temporarily, just on a daily basis when the vacancies came up.

One other firefighter had come to the station and he had been in the department probably about ten years or so at the time. During a strike, when the police and fire department went on strike, people in his station, evidently there were things going on. It was two sides, so it was pretty bitter. He left the station and then a lot of them left the station. He came up to Station 38 and he really wanted to be on the squad and he was on the squad at that time, on a temporary basis, assignment. He and I were taking EMT together and we would leave and go—he had a reputation as being—the guys said they didn't like him, you know, but he had a real bad disposition about him too. So the last day of the class, when we were going to have our final exams, I went in the—well, let me back up.

The first thing that happened was that they said they didn't have the manual and it would be a while before it would be available. I was asking the guys in the station, particularly the ones on the rescue squad that were EMTs, and they all said that they didn't have them, but he came up with one. There was one fire fighter who was extremely competent and he didn't really hang with the other guys. He says that he had been the president of Riordan High School, you know, and he evidently had a lot of women friends. He kind of looked like he could have been Robert Redford's twin brother or something, so you understand what I'm saying. I found this very interesting because I noticed that the guys, most of the people that I ran into that did racist things were the least competent individuals, and the more self-confidence, the more people tend to not be biased or racist. That's what I found with this guy, John. He said, "Go see Doug and tell him I said to give you my copy of the manual." When I went to see Doug, he says, "Oh no, that's the old copy, that's the old copy." I said okay and a few days later, I brought it up again. He said, "Well, I told you to go get my copy from Doug." I said, "That's the old copy." He said, "That's BS." He says, "You go and tell Doug I said to give you the copy." So that was the first time I really noticed that something was not right because I was actually more friendly with most of the people in the fire department than this other guy.

The last day, as I stated, I went in the study room to tell him hey, it's time to go, and I looked and he had all these quiz papers from the guys in the station, names on them, and he had them all over the table and he was reviewing them before going to take it. I said, "What is that?" He said, "Oh don't worry about it, it's nothing." He started putting it all together. I said, "You mean these guys have been giving him these quizzes and stuff all these weeks and I've not been?" That was the first thing that I noticed and right away I said, "Well, why would they do that?" I said, "I guess they don't want me on the rescue squad. They think that's what I want," and that's why I objected it.

After becoming an EMT, the next thing that I noticed in terms of progression in the department was when the time came for the lieutenant's examination. Again, one of the things that was interesting, the chief of the department at the time, Casper, I saw him at headquarters. He says, "How is your studying coming, Bob?" He was the one that I told you that my boss, when I was a watchman, had talked with. He says, "How is your studying coming, Bob?" I said, "It's great." I said, "But the NFPA [National Fire Protection Association] book, I'm having a rough time finding a copy to buy. He says, "Oh, I have one copy; it's upstairs." We were in headquarters. "It's upstairs." Then he says, "Of course it's a little marked up." He kind of gives me a wink and a nod, like, "It's kind of marked up." I got the message. What he was telling me is if I get that one, I can see what possibly is going to be on the exam. But I never got it because like I said, I always wanted to control my own destiny. I think every individual has a right to control their own destiny, and I you know, just thought the exam too was going to be on the up and up, and I'm studying all the manuals.

A couple of times I came in, even off duty or whatever, I noticed these guys would be—or even on duty—they'd be in the study room or whatever. When I'd come in, one particular guy, Joe, in particular, he would always say, "Let's take a break." You know right away, and they'd start moving these papers around. This one day I came in—and keep in mind, this is the battalion chief's station too—one day I came in and this one firefighter had a box of documents stapled together like that [points to a stack of organized papers]. He had passed them out to everybody and was passing them out and I came in and said, "What's that?" And he did like this [covers papers] and says, "That's not for you, Bob. John Harris has stuff for you black guys, down at Station 5." I kept seeing different things and I knew that one of the chiefs was involved in helping construct the exam. Sometimes I would come in and he'd have them around the table, and they'd stop talking, you know?

Prior to that I went to—well, the Black Firefighters was like a social organization, and they had a small picnic. There were maybe twenty-five people. Members would go to and then they had a dance. The dance would be more like a little small dance, you know, and that was it. You couldn't go to the president or anybody with any problems because that was unheard of. They definitely weren't going to go down and complain about any treatment

that you're receiving. So, what happened was again, the station where I was was supposed to be a difficult station. I was experiencing subtle things, but the first time I went to a Black Firefighters meeting—it was John Harris who was the first lieutenant, and he was the one I said that had the stuff for us black guys.

02-00:19:37

Farrell: Mm-hmm.

02-00:19:40

Demmons: He was a lieutenant at the time and he was preparing for the captain's test. It was interesting, three of the people that were close to him, they all were the top three African Americans on that list, that actually got promoted. Anyway, what I did was I went to a Black Firefighters meeting before that exam stuff was going on. The guys were in this guy's basement and they were just talking. Some of them were venting, talking about the stuff that they were experiencing in these stations, and it kind of set me back saying, "What in the world is going on?" Because I was supposed to be in a rough station and I don't see anything like that, you know, going on. One guy that was really, really vocal—in fact he was the second African American in the department—he was just talking about 798, and those guys, you know, he was just venting on me, just saying some stuff, horrible things that he was experiencing. He worked in Station 1, which was one of the busiest stations and where a lot of incidents happened.

During the meeting I said, "Well you know, we need to address these things. People shouldn't have to work [like this]." It was pretty much ignored. I found out that some of the guys, what they would do after the meeting, they would have a drink, they would be drinking. But I found out later too, that some of the guys were going to the meeting just to get out of the house and then they would go do other things—girlfriends, bars, whatever they would do, and use the excuse that they were at a Black Firefighters meeting. At the time, Earl Gage was in the hospital and he had had a heart attack or something. I said, "Are we going to do anything for him? Send him anything, some flowers or something, a greeting card?" They said, "Oh yeah, we'll send him a card." They really weren't concerned about it. That kind of set me back and so after the meeting adjourned and everybody was drinking, I went to the president, like I said, and he was a little older than some of the other guys. I came up to him and I said, "You know, some of these problems the guys are experiencing, we need to deal with them." I said, "I'm willing to help out in any way." His response was, "I don't have time for that, I have too many B-s to run." He was married, his wife was right upstairs, and he used that term—the "B" term. That just set me back and I said, "Well, okay. I don't really have any use, to be involved in this organization." What happened, he came by a little later, he came by my fire station and they were going to get the people to sign up for payroll deductions, where the dues would come out of our pay. He came up [and said], "I want you to sign this payroll deduction card." I said no

and I wanted him to ask me why. I was going to explain to him why I didn't want to be part of an organization that was doing stuff and not addressing the issues and talking about women, and doing all the stuff that they were doing. I don't need to be part of that. But he didn't, he just left the station. He worked down at Station 5, and I don't know if I told you but Station 5, at one point, out of the sixty-something African Americans in the department, over twenty of them were assigned to that station on Turk and Webster. I was up on California, Station 38, in Laguna. We had a call and I was on the rescue squad that day. Frank Scales, who was later one of the presidents of the Black Firefighters, before I became president. Anyway, him and one of the other black firefighters on the truck, came up to me and they were holding their axes and said, "I understand that you won't sign the card." I said, "Yeah, that's right."

The squad, at that time were outside—you rode in the back and there was a little slot where you stood in there and held on. When we were taking off, he screams, "Tell that 'n' to join!" I said, "What did he say?" When I got back to the station, I called down to the fire station to give him hell about that, but the thing was that the guys in Station 38 took that to mean that I didn't want to be associated with black folks. That's how they took that, you know. Anyway, after telling this guy what I would do to him if he pulled that stuff again, and some other stuff, I told him why I didn't sign it. He was saying, "Well, John was not going to be the president." He was giving me all that stuff.

The next time I went to a meeting—this guy Tyrone Rockett was the president at that time—this was before the lieutenant's exam. I went to inform them that steps should be taken to make sure that there are no security breaches in the exam and some of the stuff that I had seen indicated to me that you know, there's a real strong possibility that there are going to be security breaches in the process. Like I say, you had a stack of manuals you had to read to prepare and so when I was being treated like I was being treated, I said, "Well, I'll just study extra hard." Plus, I had 4 percent that I couldn't make up because of lack of seniority. Not 4—I'm sorry—8 percent, because I only had four years in. You got 1 percent per year, up to twelve years, and so I knew I had to study extra hard to try to at least be even with people who were just as prepared as I was.

I spent a lot of time studying with Jimmie Braden. I had met him in the fire academy. It was interesting, his wife, when I was going to City College, she lived across the street from me and she was going to City College. She worked for the phone company too, and so when I went to work for the phone company she was there. My future wife, at the time, knew her and worked with her at the phone company. So he and I studied. He used to live a few blocks from me. We would spend time all over the place and he had a place in his backyard. We were studying, studying hard. What happened, when I went to a Black Firefighters meeting, I was telling them we should do something, I was just met with a lot of negative thought from leadership.

It was interesting, just as a side note, one of the individuals—well, they were planning for their picnic, that's what the whole meeting was about. One of the individuals, it was interesting, he says, "Well, I'm not interested in a promotion, you guys, I have to get back to the firehouse, so I just need to get the money to fix the potato salad for the picnic." He left, and the reason I bring that up is because it was interesting, later, when the first decision came down from the Fair Employment and Housing, he came to the meeting and he said, "Bob, you should not take the job so that maybe I can get it going in because you showed that you can study because you did pass that test." This is the same guy and I said, "Boy, is this stuff real that I'm experiencing here?"

Finally, the time came to take the exam. I took the exam and it was at Mission High School, held there. As I walked out after taking the exam, one of the guys at Station 38 was out there and he was smiling and saying, "Bob, how did it go?" I said, "I hope I did okay." He said, "I know I did well." He said, "There was so many repeat questions on there that I was able to go right to the answers before I finished reading the questions." Some other guy, he said, When I was sitting in my truck and I was looking at those old exams, some of the firefighter unit came by and said it's too late to study now, and he said it wasn't too late. I knew this guy; he worked in construction, so I knew that he didn't really have the time. I knew around the station, I didn't see him doing a lot of studying, even when he was working. It feels as though someone had just hit me and knocked all the wind out of me because I knew something was going on. I didn't know it was that, exactly what. When I realized that's what was being passed out, these old exams and stuff. At that time, even some of the firefighters were complaining. You're supposed to put in your protest, and so I filed a protest. A few days after, Jimmie Braden filed a protest.

It was interesting, one of the assistant chiefs I was driving for a short while, he knew that I was filing a protest. He said, "Hell Bob." He says, "I counted 114 out of the 144 questions that we have copies of from old exams." I put that in my protest and later found out it was more like 122 out of 144 questions. Guys that had been in the department for a while. I found out what they would do was during the review period, when you can go and review the exam, they would bring out the questions and put the exams together and stuff. And then before the orders came in, those exams were available, they made them available at the Division of Training, and so the people in there knew that you could go there and get copies and stuff. That just really devastated me when I found that out.

Like I said, I passed the exam and I didn't pass high enough to get appointed. If I had had full seniority, I would have. At that point, it just made me—I guess I was naïve in a lot of ways. I thought the world was on the up-and-up and everything was fair. I just said that this stuff has to change, and so I started my protest. Civil Service ignored my protest, which they weren't supposed to do. By that time Jimmie Braden knew what was going on, too. We found out that they had given John Harris some of the questions. He

didn't have the full thing. Plus, the exam had a fire scene problem associated with it and this one battalion chief, he was a rater also, rating the men. It took two or three weeks and when they were bringing in chiefs and going over the fire scene problems and stuff like that, he would be in there—I would walk in, find him discussing it with some of the members, what they put on the exam. Keep in mind, the exam hadn't been scored yet and what answers they put down in terms of the fire scene and different stuff, but they would stop when I'd come in.

I knew that public advocates had been one of the organizations involved in the WACO [Western Addition Community Organization] case, so me and Jimmie Braden went down and spoke with Bob Gnaizda, who was with Public Advocates at the time. He told us that affirmative action is a dead issue now; the courts and things aren't interested in doing anything along those lines. The big thing now is consumer law and stuff. It was interesting, that his firm went into consumer thing after that. So, I got upset and I just said, "Look, you are representing African Americans and others when nobody asked you to." I said, "You're the attorney of record and you're telling me you don't want to do your job?" I just went off on him. He said, "I'll arrange a meeting with the mayor." So he did. He arranged a meeting with Dianne Feinstein. We went in and that's when she was making that statement I told you about earlier and stuff. She ordered Civil Service to hold a hearing. It was real interesting, Civil Service, what they did—Alioto and Tarantino, I think they were cousins, and there was another—I can't think of his name—who was president of the Civil Service Commission. They weren't getting along at all. What happened was the two people I mentioned, they resigned, that shows how bitter it was, but then they came back on to hear our case. They scheduled it after five o'clock and at the time, I didn't think much about that, but what happened was during the hearing I made my presentation and Bob Gnaizda said whatever he was going to say, and the other guys came up, and so then there was one Asian American commission. I don't recall his name, but anyway he sided with us.

02-00:37:43

Farrell: Was that Commissioner Nakajo?

02-00:37:44

Demmons: No.

02-00:37:44

Farrell: Okay, before that?

02-00:37:45

Demmons: This was the Civil Service.

02-00:37:47

Farrell: Oh, the Civil Service, sorry, okay.

02-00:37:48

Demmons: Yeah. This was way before Steve Nakajo.

02-00:37:52

Farrell: Okay. This was in the late '70s, early '80s, right?

02-00:37:55

Demmons: Yeah, '79, something like that.

02-00:37:57

Farrell: Yeah, so that is way earlier. Never mind.

02-00:38:00

Demmons: When the meeting was over, one of the guy's, firefighter's wives, heard one of the commissioners saying, "Yeah, we got a call from so and so and we know we've got to come in and support you guys. We wouldn't let you down." Because like I said, they had said they were going to resign, but they came, and stayed in just long enough to hear this. They were all celebrating and stuff. So the next morning, I found out what happened was after that meeting, Chief Casper had called all the guys that were on that list to be—he wanted to promote, could promote. Called them back from vacation, everything, and they call showed up at the Division of Training that night, about nine o'clock and were sworn in. The reason, obviously, he did that was in anticipation of us going to the courts and getting an injunction the next morning. The reason they held it at night was because they knew we couldn't get to the courts during that night. That shows how the department was really supporting everything that was going on.

02-00:39:20

Farrell: Yeah, and I want to ask you a couple more questions about that.

02-00:39:21

Demmons: Sure.

02-00:39:23

Farrell: You had mentioned you were having a hard time, when you were studying for the lieutenant test, the manual. Did you eventually get that from John Harris? Is he the one who eventually gave you the manual?

02-00:39:34

Demmons: No. When the minorities came in we all had to have a full set of manuals and you brought up another interesting point. What I found out was a lot of the old timers never had manuals. See, we were tested on the manuals while we were in the fire academy. During our probationary period we were tested and we had to learn stuff in the manuals. The test, in my opinion, was delayed because the test should have been held every four years. That's when I thought that was the test and I think the four years was like in '76, it should have been held, but they didn't hold it until two years later, in '78. You hear little comments and I heard a lot of old timers saying, "I read all those manuals." You know, I don't even have a set of manuals. I said, "What are they doing?" They're delaying it to give these guys with seniority and the advantage, even more of an advantage, because all of us knew that a lot of the manual—we obviously had to study for it more intensely to prepare for a

promotion. But we were more familiar with the manuals than they were. Manuals on everything from hydrants to different equipment, all the equipment you use and the procedures. So I guess probably about twenty manuals and most of them about a half-inch thick.

02-00:41:25

Farrell: Okay. Well, the one that you were having a hard time getting?

02-00:41:30

Demmons: Oh, that was an NFPA, national, and that was a book. It's the book where they have all the different procedures and codes for stuff. That was like about a six or seven-hundred page book. It's about three, four inches thick and that's what I was having a hard time getting.

02-00:41:52

Farrell: How did you eventually get a copy of that?

02-00:41:56

Demmons: Eventually, they had enough supplies where you order them from. It wasn't from the department. You had to order them from the publishing company; it's the national book.

02-00:42:08

Farrell: Okay. A lot of the things that you're describing—passing around tests, the recycling of questions, people stopping talking when you're walking in rooms, the new lieutenants being sworn in at 9:00 p.m., the department supporting all this, I mean that's, I feel like, an example of the systemic issues. They're structural; they're part of how the department runs. Do you have a sense of when that started, when that became part of the department culture?

02-00:42:48

Demmons: In terms of?

02-00:42:52

Farrell: Historically, I guess.

02-00:42:52

Demmons: In terms of the repeat questions and stuff like that?

02-00:42:56

Farrell: I mean just sort of perpetuating the same types of people moving up the ranks.

02-00:43:01

Demmons: Well you heard just about every one of the other chiefs talk about relatives and friends they had in the department, you know? Not just the guys would cheat, that's what was going on. I would be detailed to work in a different station for a shift and some guy would come up to me and say, "Oh, you work over there with Joe, how do you stand to work with him? He's an A-hole." You know, just saying negative stuff. Then I found out later on this was this guy's brother or cousin or something like that and was trying to get me to say

something negative about him. It's just, the nepotism, if you allow people to control, they're going to look out for their own interests, most people, that's just the way it is and that's what happened over the years in the fire and the police department; it was controlled by one group of people primarily.

One of the things that I found that was real interesting, when I first went to my first station there was an African American that worked there and it was interesting, he never promoted up. He told me, "Bob, you need to make sure you read everything around here." Particularly, whenever I had the night watch, I would just read everything I could get my hands on, go through all the files and documents, the old, old book, oh what do you call it? I'm getting old I guess.

02-00:45:02

Farrell: The reports and things?

02-00:45:03

Demmons: Yeah, logs, the journal, the journals.

02-00:45:06

Farrell: Oh the logs, yeah, yeah.

02-00:45:09

Demmons: In this one station, when I was looking at some of the journals going back to the '30s, it was interesting. I was reading this stuff and the stuff that the Italian American firefighters were complaining about was the same thing that we were experiencing as blacks in that department. Real interesting. You would notice that all of the Chiefs of Department, for years, were all Irish American even though they had a lot of Italian American and some other whites in there too. It's about control. One of the reasons I stayed, I found out it was a great job. It's a great job. They pay you and you're well respected by the citizens and stuff. I guess it's sort of like some of the stuff we talk about that's in the news now, about police and some of the things going on. Well, the way I view it, it's not—well, some of the police may be doing some of that stuff, but they're not the ones in control. You see what I'm saying? And because the politicians were afraid to do anything, to make the changes, because that would be the end of their careers because the firefighter was just that powerful. The largest number of individuals in the department were Irish American. In San Francisco you can talk about Boston, certain departments like that.

So, I was reading these journals and I found out a lot of stuff was going on when you talk about the culture. For instance, during those days obviously we didn't have computers. We would type reports up and use White-Out. I was working at this one station, driving this chief, and like I said, I would always get up real early even when I didn't have the night watch. I would get up real early and go do stuff in the chief's office in particular, reading different things. I was looking at them and I saw this report. Some of the reports the

chief had to turn in, but some of them, you know, you're operator, you would do. I was going through the different things that happened in the reports that were going in by collecting the reports also from the companies in your battalion. I was going through those to see what was going on and I saw this report that the chief was turning in and trust me, I'm not the best speller in the world, but I looked and I'm saying hmm, he's misspelled this word. So I whited it out and put the correct spelling in there. I said, "He may look at this report more and notice the Wite-Out and stuff, and notice there were some changes." I was just telling him, "Not like you're stupid." I was telling him like, "Chief." I said, "I changed one of the words in there that was misspelled, in your report." I wasn't saying in a negative way. I just wanted him to know in case he saw where the word had been whited-out and changed. He said, "If that report went in with the word misspelled, I'm not the only one that sent a report in with that word misspelled in it, because—." He goes over to the filing cabinet, pulls out a report, and says "This is the one that we use, to copy from." I said, "I don't believe he's saying this." So, there's a lot of other chiefs been sending that report in with the word misspelled too, and I'm saying, "Whoa, excuse me." To me it wasn't a big deal because like I said, I'm not the best speller in the world. Like I told you before, I'm tone deaf so I have to really rely on a lot of memory rather than phonetics.

02-00:49:42

Farrell:

Mm-hmm.

02-00:49:44

Demmons:

But that just blew me away. They started sending me out as a temporary lieutenant because I was on the list, you know, but I had passed the test. I think the first day I went out was on Christmas Day. They were short, so they sent me out. I started going out more and more, as a chief operator, filling in vacation spots and disability spots and what have you. When, the exam, I started protesting it and stuff, it was really interesting that finally, what we did was we got—. Oh what happened after we saw Mayor Feinstein and stuff and before the Civil Service held their meeting, one of the guys that I told you about, that we came in together. He passed away a few years ago but he was the one who kind of saved me in the Fire Academy. He came to Station 38 to work, where I was. Chief Casper had jumped the gun because once the list came out he started sending those guys that were reachable out, putting them in lieutenant positions because there was a lot of vacancies. You're not supposed to use that list until it's adopted, but he was using it, prematurely using, it to send these guys out.

One day I wasn't working, I got a call from this guy Jimmie. He said, "Bob." He said, "They were here in the station." He said they were having a celebration because this guy Tom—in fact this guy was the one that I didn't experience anything from in there, and I don't know why he didn't share that stuff with me, but I know that he really studied and he really, you know. He may have had those, which he did I'm sure, but I know that he really put the

time in. I had respect for him, you know, and that's what was hard because everybody wasn't guilty, you know, and you're holding up people's promotions and stuff. That's not an easy thing to do. So this guy called me and he said, "Bob." He said, "They were having a party because this was Tom's last day here as a firefighter and he's being sent out as a temporary lieutenant, and so they're having a party in the station for him." He said, "During the party, a teletype message came across saying that all the people that were going out as temporary lieutenants have to go back to being a firefighter because there's been a hold on things." He said the guys were screaming mad and so he called me and at the time, they didn't know that I was really pushing Bob Gnaizda and stuff. What happened was for several days, you know, they were like who's holding up the promotions and didn't know.

I was an operator, like I said, and I had to call the stations. I called Station 3, which some of the black firefighters used to refer to it as Johannesburg West. And see 3 Truck, they were up there at 38, where I was, while they were building a new station. One of the officers, when he answered the phone he said, "Oh Bobby." He says, "Frank Scales—" and that's the guy that you talked about, that used the "N" word and all that—"Frank Scales is up here telling them that you and Jimmie Braden are the ones holding up everybody's promotion." He just went on like, "No way I believe that you are doing that." I heard the guys in the background say, "Oooohhh!" like you're telling on Frank Scales. What he was trying to do was trying to get them, you know, to do stuff to me; that's why he went to that station. This guy that said that to me. He was like no way Bob was doing that, like I said, because during that time a lot of them guys—and he knew me from up at 38 and although he didn't work there but the truck, his members did, they all knew me and they knew I was friends with different ones. I went to banquets and you know, different things. So there was no way he believed it.

I kind of jumped around because there was one point I was telling you about, which stuff is twenty years old or more, and I'm getting old. So you have to forgive me for jumping around, but I do want to share stuff with you; it's important.

02-00:55:32

Farrell:

Absolutely.

02-00:55:33

Demmons:

This guy that I told you about that was the most vocal in the Black Firefighters meeting, Edgar, I saw him not long after that meeting at a big fire incident. He wouldn't even make eye contact with me. I noticed that he would see some of the other guys and ten feet away would go, "Hey, Johnny, how are you doing?" I said, "Now he's the one that was complaining the most. He's shunning me and here's this guy that he's calling some of the most racist

individuals, and he's all buddy-buddy with him a smile on his face." So that was something that was interesting to me when that went down.

So getting back to the deal. So, Gnaizda, after he had that meeting he just left. He said, "I did the best I could and I'm out of here." Jimmie Braden and I, we went all over the Bay Area, looking for civil rights attorneys and stuff. I didn't realize at the time, the WACO consent agreement was still in, and it didn't really give any meaningful relief, particularly in terms of promotion and stuff. These attorneys didn't want to—Jimmie and I didn't have money and we weren't the leadership of the Black Firefighters.

Let me back up too, again. One of the things that happened when Bob Gnaizda got that meeting with the mayor. Well, when I got to city hall, I was like one of the last ones to show up because the executive board were against us. They were supporting the city and the union. What I did was find an attorney to write up a petition that I wanted saying that they supported challenging that examination. I had printed up a lot of copies and Jimmie joined us and a few, about five, of the Black Firefighters that wanted things changed for the better and stuff, they had sort of joined with me in the effort to do that.

I'm kind of jumping around again. I was talking about when the list was being held up. I just made up my mind that I was going to tell them. I filed a protest because I think it's wrong. I went in to work one morning and I told the captain I wanted to tell everybody why I did it, I was the one holding up the—. The off-going shift, everybody, said, "Oh Bob is going to tell us what happened." I just told them. I said what I did was, you know, I felt it was wrong. I said, "I know it's hurting some of you guys and stopping you from being promoted, but it's not right what they're doing." I said, "I feel that I have a right to protest and do that, and I'm exercising my right." And I said, "I hope none of you take it personal, although I know that some of you will." I said, "But that's just the way I feel about it." I said, "I've tried to do things right in my life, particularly in the latter part of my life, and I'd rather follow the rules, live by rules and all of us." I said, "I came in this department, one of the reasons was because I felt that as long as I applied myself, I could advance." I said, "And this undermines that, what went on there." So I just told them and now everybody knew.

My friend said that he heard that the guy that I told you used to always break up the study session, he says, "Well, I feel sorry for Bob. He has a long way to go in this department." So when I heard that and I thought well, if I can't do what I have a right to do—a legal right to do—without fear of being retaliated against for the rest of my career, then something has to change. Something has to change. I made up my mind then. Jimmie Braden and I went around and we had this petition made up. Different guys were taking them around to the Black Firefighters to get them to sign because the executive board, we weren't on it.

It was interesting, one of the guys that, I felt that he was more with the other side—the executive board, than he was with us, he was just trying to find out what we were doing. I suspected that, so what I did was he saw twelve petitions. He didn't know that we had a lot of other petitions, and so when I got to City Hall, the guy I told you about that was doing all the complaining, he was there, because he was on the executive board. So John Harris and all these guys, they were there around Bob Gnaizda and I guess the department had notified them that we were coming to meet with the mayor. Gnaizda said, "Well, Bob, I'm not going to be involved in this." He says, "These guys say they represent the Black Firefighters and you don't go forth. They think the exam was fair and all this and he's just all shook up and things. So I'm not going to go in there with the mayor." I said, "Well, they may be the executive board, but I have petitions from the majority—overwhelmingly—the majority of the Black Firefighters saying that they do want to join the protest and fight." So that guy says, "What twelve petitions?" That just proved to me that I knew that this guy that was doing the secret agent stuff. I told him, I said "Well, I think we have a little more than twelve petitions." I had them in an attaché case, so I broke them all out. When Gnaizda saw that we had over 80 percent of the members that had signed a petition, saying they want to protest. So that's how we went in. After that, he went in to see the mayor, but these guys were still in there saying the test was fair and all they had to do was study, you know all that. We believe in the merit system, you know all the key words, when they knew what was going on.

One of the things, they would send me to a different station. Just about every time I would come to work and I wouldn't know where I was going until the night before. I'd have to call in to find out where was our detail. I think that was more to intimidate me and when I look back at my life, I saw a lot of things that happened in my life that sort of prepared me for dealing with the things in it. I wasn't intimidated and plus, a lot of those guys, even though they change, I worked with a lot of them before, you know. A lot of them had a lot of respect for me and liked working with me, but not after I was doing the stuff I was doing. It was interesting, when I went as an officer to these different stations, I recall the first few times I said, "Now, you've got the chiefs, the battalion chiefs or whatever, coming by and they're not offering me—" and that's what they're supposed to do when they make their rounds; talk with their officers. They just almost were ignoring me like I had the plague and going and talking to different members of my crew. Yeah you've got Bob down here working today. That type of thing, and they weren't sharing any of it. So here I was, I had to function as an officer and the one thing that was great was that I was familiar with the reports because I had worked as a chief's operator. I said, "Boy, if I didn't know about these reports and notice some of this other stuff, I would really be lost."

The other black officers, I couldn't call on them if I had a question about anything and so I was just thrown in the pool and said swim or sink. There were two things that helped me. One, like I said, working like a chief operator

I was familiar with all the department reports. Two, I had been in the Marine Corps and I had been the fire team leader, squad leader. Plus, unfortunately—well I won't say unfortunately, but it did prepare me—I had been in a couple of gangs; one in San Francisco, one in Oakland, where I was the one leadership position and the other one of the leaders. So that helped me and that prepared me. I did what I needed to do to get the job done.

It was interesting, one of the fires I went to as a lieutenant, the guy, one of my crew members, it was an abandoned building and it had a carpet, rug or whatever, on the floor, but it didn't have any floor boards. It just had the floor joists sticking up like that. So he grabbed the carpet and said, "Come on, help me with this!" You know, like he's giving me orders, like I don't know what I'm doing. So I told him, I said, "You drop that carpet and get over there." At the time, one of my crew members were on the nozzle of a hose and the battalion chief was backing him up on the hose and I said, "You get over there and back the man up on that hose." He said, "Well the chief's got it." I said, "That's not the chief's job, that's your job. That's not the chief's job to be doing that." So the chief looked like damn, Bob's right—this is not my job. The guy went and did what I ordered him to do and then he started stumbling around like oh, I'm going to fall through this floor joists and get injured. The chief told him to knock it off because he saw what he was doing. But that's not unique. It was real prevalent among the black firefighters that went out as officers, and women later.

One of the things that I noticed, even with some of the white officers, even with some that were supposed to be respectable, that in the firehouse you had leaders and you have "unofficial" leaders, you know what I'm saying?

02-01:08:33

Farrell: Mm-hmm.

02-01:08:35

Demmons: I think that was one of the problems that a lot of the firefighters brought up in some of these sessions, said we're not seeing leadership from our officers and chief officers. There's so much stuff and there's so many years. For instance, at one point, well you know I was president for twelve years.

02-01:08:59

Farrell: Right.

02-01:09:02

Demmons: At one point, I looked back over the prior nine years that had gone by and realized that I had only taken off three days in a row during that nine-year period where I didn't deal with fire department stuff. So you can imagine what's going on in my head, why I keep—it triggers more thoughts, that kind of go in with that. After I became chief, I had expressed to all the employee organizations—the union, Asian Firefighters. In fact, I had the Asian Firefighters, Bernie Lee, was involved in a lot of stuff with me, department

stuff. He was sort of like the unofficial leaders of the Asian Firefighters. I had talked with him before they formed the organization. I said, "You know Bernie, you guys need to form an organization, not to say you're going to do what the union is doing. But there's things that are unique to your community, that you can really help provide the level of service that's really needed in your community. There are different concerns that you may have that are unique." So after a few months he started organizing. That's very intimidating too, see. He told me that they had \$500 and I think they needed \$200 or \$300 more to form an organization. I gave him \$100 and I said, "Here, you guys form it."

I had offered to meet with any other groups that wanted to meet with me and so the Black Firefighters asked me to come to one of their meetings. We were talking about leadership and everything. One of the things that, when I went to the meeting and I was listening, there was about forty Black Firefighters in the meeting, and so I was listening to different complaints they were having. One guy was saying that well—he was a lieutenant and he said, "Well, all my crew is white." I said, "What's wrong with him?" I said, "On top of that, he's the officer so stuff shouldn't be going on there making anybody feel uncomfortable."

I listened to all these guys complaining and I looked and I realized, out of the approximately forty of the individuals that were in there that there was only about five or six that weren't at least a lieutenant. There was one AC in there, assistant chief, black assistant chief, a couple battalion chiefs. What it was, it was part of that culture where the chief made all the decisions. I told you about the workgroup we had where the consultants and how they were all pointing to the chief. After I listened to all their complaints I'd tell them, "Well I heard some complaints about things going on in the firehouse that the company officer should be addressing." I said, "I'm not going to do a Lieutenant's, Captains, Battalion Chief's, nor an Assistant Chief's job, been there done that. What I do now is I do 'Chiefing'". I said, "As far as that goes, if blacks are being mistreated on a particular shift and you're an assistant chief and it's not on your shift, what you need to do is you need to get together with the other two members of equal rank and have a meeting and say okay, we need to decide how we're going to treat people. If you're mistreating people just because they look like me, then I'm going to mistreat people that look like you." You know, I'm just making a point. I said, "Now, either we're going to screw over our people or we're going to all treat our people like they should be treated, period. They need to come into an environment where they can work and not be harassed and not be mistreated and stuff."

It was just amazing to me, that they had followed this same culture, where they were looking for the chief to solve all the problems. I told them the only problems I have to solve and deal with as chief are deputy chief problems because they're the ones that report to me. I just found that interesting in

terms of the culture. It was widespread in there, how things were run, and I wanted to change that.

That was one of the things I came up with, with the retreat thing. I assigned all the people in leadership positions, both uniform and civilians. You'll see in that strategic plan where I assigned them all things. We started with our mission and value statement. What I wanted to do was link everything that we did in that department to our mission and values statement. You'll see how I broke it down in there and that's what we did. I was really proud of them because they really rolled up their sleeves and they did an outstanding job, you'll see.

02-01:15:48

Farrell:

Yeah.

02-01:15:49

Demmons:

When I get you a copy of that Accomplishment Report, where it specifically deals with what each individuals accomplish, that you'll see.

02-01:16:00

Farrell:

I have some more questions about the Black Firefighters Association. Did it originally start as more of a social group and less of an advocacy group?

02-01:16:11

Demmons:

Not more, totally a social group. Not some of the other chapters in the international. Apparently, John Harris came to Oakland, had a chapter, and he, John Harris, started the chapter but that was strictly what it was, a social organization. That's all they did.

02-01:16:34

Farrell:

So you went and then you were working with other organizations and they invited you back to the meetings and you said we need to treat everybody the same. Is that around the time that it changed? Did that change with you?

02-01:16:51

Demmons:

No. What happened was, some of the guys started joining me. I would go to the Black Firefighters meetings and try to get them to move. This was before they would come out, they came out supporting us. So it was just Jimmie Braden and myself.

02-01:17:13

Farrell:

Okay, right.

02-01:17:15

Demmons:

What would have happened would be Frank Scales and some of the other members of the Black Firefighters—when he was the president at the time—they would call people in that were ignorant about what the issues were and get them and to say, "Well, that's Bob. Just sour grapes." They didn't get promoted high enough, pass high enough, so the guys would come to the meetings and they would hold votes before I would get a chance to really explain what was going

on. Some of them, after some of the meetings, some of the guys were saying—I recall one meeting in particular, this guy, Nate, he had broke the weightlifting thing for the Olympics, the fire department Olympics, a big guy. After the meeting everybody was going and starting to drink, he came up to me and he says, “Bob, I didn’t know what was going on,” before we voted, before we heard what was going on. I was kind of upset and I just said, “You shouldn’t have been voting if you don’t know what the hell you was voting for.” So, we kept educating the members, little by little, and more people started joining in and stuff.

At one point, we had another hearing. This is when we were trying to get Civil Service to do something, still try to get them to do something about the exams and stuff. Frank Scales, who was the president at the time, he was raised in Hunters Point, and so Jimmie Braden was raised in Hunters Point. Jimmie Braden has a pretty large family, and his older brother—in fact, Scales had told me about Jimmie’s older brother and you know, there were gangs all over the city at the time, but Jimmie’s older brother had a nickname, “Bull.” Frank told me that and said he was the only person in Hunters Point that he knew of at the time, that wasn’t affiliated with any gang, but he was tough enough that nobody messed with him. So, when we had this hearing before the Civil Service and we had the Black Firefighters, the leadership was against us, and then some of the other minorities there, I got them. I told Jimmie Braden because I had gotten a sense that Scales was kind of, you know, can be kind of intimidated a little bit. I told him, I said, “Tell Bull I want him to come to that meeting.” So Jimmie had his brother come to the meeting. I was at one microphone and this guy Kevin Gonzalves was at the other microphone. He was presenting the union, his side, and the exam was fair, nothing was wrong, and I was on the other side. At the time, like I said, I wasn’t the president of the Black Firefighters.

After we were talking—this is before the commission—the place was packed, they had some people for other issues. In fact, some of them from Hunters Point, some women and stuff from Hunters Point, were there. He said, “Well we have the president of the Black Firefighters and he will tell you the exam was fair.” He said, “Frank,” and so Scales was in the back and he started up, and so I said—because we had been doing a lot of stuff, like the petitions, catching them off guard. I was trained in anti-guerilla warfare, so I know how to conduct warfare in the Marine Corps. So I said, “You mean our used-to-be president?” He stopped, he backed up and he left out because when I said that part of it, he was saying, “Does Bob have something where they done voted me out?” He didn’t know what was going on, so I just said that.

After the meeting was over, he had went out in the hall. He said, “Bob.” He says, “I saw Bull.” So that evening, he came to my house and gave me his resignation and I didn’t even know he knew where I lived. I said, “That’s unbelievable that’s how intimidated or whatever, he was.” He had typed up a resignation, signed it, and brought it to me. I wasn’t on the executive board or

nothing, he just brought it to my house. So what happened was the other executive, John Harris, and some of the other ones were mad because he did that because they knew I had his [resignation]. They said that we were going to have an election to elect a new president. I made a motion because before that, out of the sixty-something Black Firefighters, only about less than fifteen participated in any election. I said in order for the election to be valid, we have to have at least 50 percent plus, in order for it to be valid. So, some of them said, "Oh yeah, we'll never get over 50 percent of the people to participate," and so that motion passed. Right before that, when everybody knew, the guys knew that Frank was going to resign. I said, "Yeah." I said, "Well we've got to figure out who we're going to run for president." They were all looking at me like—I said, "Oh no, not me because I don't know anything about no Robert's Rules and I said I'm not comfortable speaking, public speaking to people and stuff." A couple guys said, "Bob, what the hell do you think you've been doing for the last few months, talking all over the place?"

So, I got sort of drafted and I really didn't want to be president. I figured that probably again, a year or two, you know—they're two-year terms—I'll serve one term and that will be it, we'll have all these problems solved. That's how naïve I was. When they had the election, they had a committee, and so they were going to send the ballots to this guy Tyrone, another Tyrone, he was on the committee, and he used his mailing address because we didn't have an office at that time. Every now and then he would say, "Well, we got so many." But what I did was I had several copies made up and I had two of the people, Jimmie Braden and one of the other guys, they would go around to the firehouses and I had fixed it up where the outside, you had the person's name on it, then it had a ballot inside, envelope with nothing on it, and then the ballot inside of that. The guys were collecting ballots and Tyrone didn't know. He thought, Scales, the rest of them, John Harris and them, thought that the only ballots we had were the ones that were being mailed back in. They didn't realize that we had collected a big stack of ballots and we had almost 100 percent of the membership that had voted. They didn't know. The night we were using one of the sign calls for a meeting and the night when we were going to count the ballots and stuff, well those guys were feeling real comfortable because they didn't think we had 50 percent of the ballots. When the meeting started, one of the guys that had all the ballots, when he broke it out, I saw some of the guys and I said, "Take your hands off of those." We wanted to make sure that people didn't vote twice and we wanted to make sure that nobody knew who wrote it. So we took the outside envelope, you know how you do it, put that envelope, with nothing on the outside, put those altogether, after we opened them up and mixed them all up.

One of the things that was interesting, the reason I wanted 50 percent or more, more than 50 percent, because if I was going to represent people, I wanted to make sure I represented the majority. I wanted to make sure that they were committed to the things that I was planning on doing as president. They

started counting the ballots and oh, let me back up. Before that, what had happened when we had the nominations, John Harris had a flyer that one of the guys, Joe, he was on our side, but you've got to watch him. He did stuff but he went through a lot of harassment and stuff. He had printed a flyer I had no knowledge of and had passed it out in Hunters Point, calling them guys, John Harris and the rest of the executive board Uncle Toms. So, John had one of the flyers and that was the first time I saw it. I had no idea that Joe did that; I would have stopped him if I'd known he was doing that. So he broke out this thing, read the flyer and said, "I wasn't going to run." Like I said, he was the founding president; he was the highest ranking black in the department. He knew all the guys. A lot of the black guys didn't know me, because like I said, I didn't socialize with them because I didn't work with them. Some of the ones I did, I met, you know in the fire college or whatever. He had that advantage over me. Because of that, he says, "I wasn't going to run but because of that, I'm running now. I'm running." In other words, you guys got the position but now I'm going to take it because you don't have a chance. That kind of motivated me too. I was saying, "Who does he think he is?"

The night when they were counting the ballots, we had about sixty-something ballots and it was almost 100 percent of the membership had voted. It blew me away because the guy that was counting them, we were all watching and stuff, that out of the first fifty-something ballots, I had about almost fifty.

02-01:29:49

Farrell:

Wow.

02-01:29:50

Demmons:

I mean you can say, "Well, we actually were trying to save John from being further embarrassed," but it turned out, like I said, that out of the sixty-something, I got about fifty. That let me know that they really wanted to change from a social organization to one of advocacy. At that point, what I did was I wanted to see what my duties were as president and that was part of my duties to represent the members in terms of complaints that they had about the treatment they were receiving and stuff. I said, "I'll go do that."

02-01:30:32

Farrell:

What year was this?

02-01:30:33

Demmons:

'79.

02-01:30:34

Farrell:

'79, okay. You had mentioned that you didn't initially want to be president. Why didn't you want to be president?

02-01:30:42

Demmons:

You asked me before what I wanted to do. I've always been a private person, even though I've been involved with a gang and all that stuff, and I had a family, I had kids. I didn't hang out in nightclubs and bars; I spent time with

my family. Just being president was intimidating to me. I wasn't sure that I could do all the things that the position required and I just wanted my time to be my time. I wanted to enjoy my family and just like I told you, how much time I spent dealing with fire department stuff and dealing with issues. That meant I had to deal with not only my issues, I had to deal with other people's issues, that I represented and stuff. I won't say that I wanted to be liked, but nobody likes to be hated that I know of, and that's what I just wanted to do. I didn't want to do it. Plus, like I said, one of the things was that I wasn't familiar with Robert's Rules of Order. I was joking with the guys later on in some of our initial meetings and I saw it at the international. I saw where they would get bogged down in procedure. I'll make a motion and appoint a board, you know and all that stuff, and then they waste a lot of time and they never get anything accomplished.

In some of the meetings early on, just sort of a side note, a couple guys wanted to show how much they knew about Robert's Rules -- point of order. They were standing up and doing all this stuff when I'm trying to get things accomplished. They said, "Oh, Robert's Rules." Say it now. I said, "Well I'm Robert, I'm ruling, sit down and shut up." [laughs] It was tough and you have to remember what I said, by that time too, I knew most of the chiefs because I had driven just about all of them before I really started my protest and stuff. When I became president, I had people that I considered my friends [who] weren't my friends any more, and even before I was president, just by me protesting, you know? It was just something I didn't want to do.

02-01:34:07

Farrell:

Yeah.

02-01:34:09

Demmons:

But like I said, I knew that I had been played, and I knew that I wanted changes. I knew the department had to change and I didn't see anybody else stepping up.

02-01:34:23

Farrell:

You clearly have the support, from the votes. Can you tell me a little bit about how you went from changing it from a social organization to an advocacy organization, and maybe what some of your initiatives were?

02-01:34:37

Demmons:

I shared with you some of the things that I experienced before I was the president, but once it became clear that I was involved in protesting and fighting, one day I saw a thing on my locker where somebody had—we collected money or did something [for a] black [firefighter who was killed] in the Sacramento area—they killed a black man for \$150—and the article was put on my locker saying, "Be careful, Bob. We have \$100 in a kitty already," or something like that. And then different individuals would come to me and they would say, "I heard you better watch out in the smoky fires." I would ask them, I'd say, "Who did you hear that from?" They said they wouldn't tell me.

I just sort of put the word out. I said, "Next time I hear something like that, I'm going to take it as coming from the person that's telling me that, if they can't tell me who they heard it from." So that kind of stopped.

When I made permanent operator, any time you get promoted, your fire station, what they normally do is have a banquet for all the people that got promoted during that time period. I got promoted to operator, some of the other guys eventually, like I said, they later got promoted to lieutenant and stuff like that and they didn't have a banquet. It was very interesting that this guy, Bob, he worked at Station 16 in the Marina, which is one of our stations in our battalion. He would get detailed up to Station 38 and then the next thing I know, he became a member of Station 38. Each station has a house collector and what they do, you pay house dues every month and that takes care of your staples like flour. You know, you pay for your own food on the day you're working, but your staples like flour and all that stuff, other things you need like that, and anything that you need to help the station, you pay dues and that's what your dues go for. Usually that position is somebody with a lot of seniority in the station and well-respected and blah-blah-blah. So that's their job, to do that. I looked around and Bob Evans, right after he got there, they had made him the house collector. I said, "That's strange." The next thing I know, the house collector also sort of leads the thing for the banquet. So they had Bob Evans, the house collector, he was the person who was putting together the banquet. That justified them in saying, "Well Bob Evans is black, so by excluding Bob Demmons we can say it's not a racial thing." He allowed them to use him like that.

It was interesting, to jump forward. At one point, this reverend, one of the ministers, Reverend Gloyd, he convinced Mayor Feinstein that he could control a lot of the black leaders for different reasons. I can go into it because it's kind of in-depth and I want to make sure that I tell it really the way I see it. So, she put him on the Civil Service Commission because he had somehow convinced her that he could control the Black Firefighters because we were embarrassing her, [with] the different things that we were doing. You could see some of the letters, how we were cc'ing different people and stuff.

He got on the commission and what he did was the two guys that were closest to me, Jimmie Braden and Jimmy Dunson, he had got another minister on the fire commission, got the mayor to put him on the fire commission. The two of them had called my two right-hand people to a meeting in one of their churches, and I found out about it later. What happened was that they had told them, "Bob has done a lot for you guys but he's burned out a lot of people and he's burned out himself. You all need to get a new president," and blah-blah-blah. One of the things that I used to really get upset about, and I used to try to get guys to do stuff, was that I knew I wasn't going to sell them out. I figured some of the people in the opposition felt that I was the only person that they had to deal with, that they would come after me in ways that bothered me. So Dunson, like I said he was quite a person, but when he told me about the

meeting afterwards and they were telling them, "You all need to get a new president." He said that after they left the meeting, they started high-fiving one another saying, "Bob hasn't sold us out." I used to tease Jimmy about it. I said, "How come you didn't tell me about the meeting beforehand, and I said you wanted to see what they were going to offer you huh?" He said, "You go to hell, Bob," you know, laughing. I knew he wouldn't do nothing like that, not him, not Jimmy Dunson. But I used to tease him about that every now and then saying, "Yeah, you were trying to see what they were going to offer you and sell me out."

Later, apparently—I didn't know about this until a little later—a couple of years or so after that happened, I was meeting—in fact, we were meeting over here in the park up there by Keller—this guy Bob Evans was there and we were talking about different things and looking to see where we were and all. He brought up the fact that some of the other Black Firefighters, some of them were around, like put into leadership positions, but I never trusted them. They did stuff that kind of indicated to me that they were all about themselves, more than they were about others. I found out that they had a meeting at one of the guy's houses and they tried to talk Bob Evans into running against me for president. That let me know that these ministers actually didn't get through to the two guys they went to some of the other guys that had been supposedly in leadership positions.

Bob Evans was in this meeting. He told us how they tried to get him to run, one of the guys, as we kept meeting, he kept saying, "They wanted you to run against Bob? That's crazy." I said, "James, let it go," but he couldn't get over that, you know. That kind of indicated to me why they chose him because somebody in the department had told him that he's somebody that they can use against me because they had done that with that banquet situation. He wasn't really that active in the Black Firefighters at all, so that even speaks more to it. You know, he was a member and all that, but he wasn't really one of the people in a leadership position. So that's some of the things that we had to contend with.

One time, when I was convinced somebody tried to kill me—I was driving the service squad that night and the service squad is where you go to big fires and you have all the oxygen tanks, air tanks, the refill because the guys can come to the truck and get a new air bottle, you know. In big fires, that's where you usually you don't go to normal, small fires, just the big ones. That truck had a cab that tilted forward and you would go forward, the seat and stuff would go forward. I was driving that and we had a fire on—you're familiar with the city?

02-01:45:15

Farrell:

Mm-hmm.

02-01:45:16

Demmons:

We had a fire on Turk and Broderick, on the corner there, and you know there's a hill going down to Divisadero from there. I was on the service squad and so what you do is you hook that cab so it don't go forward. After the fire, instead of going down Turk, St. Joseph's is a real short street right next to Broderick, right there.

02-01:45:46

Farrell:

Yeah.

02-01:45:49

Demmons:

Going toward Kaiser Hospital.

02-01:45:50

Farrell:

Exactly, yeah.

02-01:45:51

Demmons:

I went that way, instead of going down that hill. When I hit the brakes, when I was on St. Joseph's, that whole cab came forward with me. Here I am, looking at the street like this [angled forward, facing the ground]. The ignition switch and stuff is back there, and so the only thing I had that I could reach was the radio. It was revving up. I had a real hard time because I'm like this, trying to keep it [the cab] from moving, because I've got the brake and stuff. I was able to call, radio, and request help. I waited a long time and finally, the rescue squad came. Some of the guys, you know, they thought that was funny and they started laughing. I said, "Yeah, well stop laughing and get me out of here." I had hurt my knee. As I thought about it, now if I'd had gone down Turk, I would have went straight into Divisadero without stopping, with that cab like that, and you know how heavy some of that traffic can be on Divisadero, on top of that. I said, "You know, that would have been a disaster." So, somebody unhooked that cab while I was at the fire.

02-01:47:28

Farrell:

What was that like for you, to go back to work the next day after that had happened?

02-01:47:33

Demmons:

Well, after that happened, it took me a while to put it all together. I had to go off because I had hurt my knee. In fact, it's funny, that next morning I was supposed to go fishing with one of the guys. We'd reserved a boat, a charter, a place on a boat, and so I couldn't go and I was off for a while, until my knee healed. I never brought that part up.

One of the things is that I tried to, as best I could, downplay a lot of stuff that was going on with me because I didn't want a lot of the focus to be on the problems I was having. I wanted the focus to be on the broader problems that were going on with the members and stuff. It became clear to me that my life was in danger and they were doing stuff to Jimmie Braden, unheard of, when you read some of it in there. I would go to work and I guess what really got

me going was when I thought about being in the Marine Corps. I thought that I was willing to give my life for this country. Fortunately, I didn't have to, but I was willing to do that and I thought about people that I knew that contributed a lot more to mankind, womankind, than I could ever dream of doing, and that they had sacrificed their lives. I came to have to face the facts that one day I was going to die like everybody else, and I felt that I didn't want to die a spiritual death. I said a physical death, inevitable. A lot of people that didn't live nowhere near as long as I had already lived had given up their life for mankind and womankind and whatever. They were more important to others than I would ever be, so why should I do that? I said, "I don't want to give up my spirit, I don't want to be doing things evil, supporting things bad." I looked at people and I said, "Well, nobody has a right to tell people how to live as long as they're not harming others" I said, "Because when it comes to dying, nobody can die for somebody else, no matter how much they want to, so they shouldn't be trying to live for somebody else."

So I just accepted the fact that I could get killed. I just accepted that and I was willing to accept that. Every day that I had to go to work I would say a prayer. The main thing I would ask, pray that my family would be taken care of if something happened to me. I added on something and I don't think God was pleased with what I added on and I said, "If some people are trying to kill me, let me take them with me," which is bad. But, I got to the point that where I would be at fires and I always had to be aware of who was around me and stuff like that, and that's what I did. I didn't have any choice, I was aware of that.

I recall I was at one fire and it was not just, you know, a lot of the Black Firefighters, even some of those that weren't really that active in the struggle, were being dealt with in intimidating ways and stuff. I recall one firefighter—like I said, I was an operator and usually in your company, you're supposed to be with your company unless like a truck company, you may send two people to do something or whatever. So this one black firefighter, he was all by himself and he was looking for—he said, "Bob, do you see a ceiling hook?" One of the tools we used. I said, "I think I saw one on the roof or something." I dropped doing what I was doing, looked around, and all of a sudden he's still around there. I said, "What are you doing?" I said, "I told you it was on the roof," and then I realized he was afraid to go up on the roof by himself. I had to go up there with him.

02-01:53:20

Farrell:

Did the things that you experienced and that Jimmie experienced, did that motivate you to work to change things as president?

02-01:53:32

Demmons:

Oh yeah, oh yeah, most definitely. One of the things that I learned in the Marine Corps too is that you care for one another. Marines don't even leave their dead behind, you know what I'm saying? So I guess that came through in

my leadership, even during this period. When I would be detailed at some other station, in the beginning it would be kind of, you know. But then after I would be there, particularly if I was in a vacation spot for a while, the guys would react because I guess they understood that I cared about them. I think that's something you can't fake, in my mind, you have to genuinely—and to me, that's one of the main criteria of being a leader, you have to care about the people you lead.

02-01:54:39

Farrell:

How were you going about conveying these issues and the situations and the treatment that you were facing? How did you convey that to both the department and maybe the public?

02-01:54:57

Demmons:

At first, I would go to the chief and talk about it. Some of the things I would bring up would be would the person that filed, that person didn't mind being identified as a person complaining. As things went on, more times than not, the individuals would express stuff to me. In particular, they didn't tell me not to tell who they were—they had confidence that I would not do that, divulge that—they really would come to me. It was interesting, particularly when I was a chief's operator; when you drive a battalion chief, you visit the fire stations, so I would go by some of the fire stations with the chief and sometimes I'd see a black firefighter on the apparatus floor. They'd see me and they'd disappear because they didn't want the department to know that they were associated with me. I understood that. And so some of these black firefighters had been on the phone with me a couple days before, complaining about stuff. Like I said, I never discussed the Black Firefighters business when I was working in the department. They didn't know that, but they would—that's how some of them would act. But I said, "Okay, if that's what it takes for you to stay and work in peace, then don't associate with me."

One of the things that was interesting, I had told you about it, when we got out of the union, what was interesting was because there was less than ten of us that were kind of vocal that they thought to get out of the union. They thought it would only be maybe ten. They didn't realize that I had cards from almost 100 percent of the Black Firefighters saying they wanted to withdraw from the union. I just hadn't turned them in. I told you, it took me a long time because I was trying to avoid it, you know, getting out of the union. When we did get out of the union, when I turned them in and there was like about fifty-something out of seventy or sixty members we had at the time, that was a devastating blow to the union. It shocked them because they had no idea that many people would stand up or felt the way they felt. They thought it was just Bob Demmons and five or six other guys. When that happened, the first person that came to me was Curtis McClain, who was the treasurer for the ILWU [International Longshore and Warehouse Union] nationally, and he was on the fire commission. It shook him. He said, "That's a powerful statement, that many guys would get out of the union like that." I heard it

from other folks too and like I said, it caught the union completely off guard because they had no idea that many would get out of the union.

I went around trying to get help. The union, they were going to take a vote on whether they were going to support the consent decree, support the suit and stuff. I was still in the union then so I went to the meeting. I couldn't get any of the other Black Firefighters to go to the meeting, not a single one, so I went there by myself. The place, the union hall, was packed. I looked and there was one chair in the middle. I don't know if somebody had planned on saving that for somebody or whatever, but I went and took that seat. It was interesting, you could see some of the guys, they would come into the meeting and some of them would look and see me and kind of go like that, [makes gesture] because there was standing room only too in there. When the meeting started and they brought up the issue, different guys were saying something and so I got recognized. I stood up and I said, "Look, I'll tell you guys, I have no problem with the guys on the list fighting to preserve the list and the exam." I said, "But what I do have a problem with is I'm paying dues, just like everybody else, and I don't think the union should be involved in siding with the city against me. I said, "Well you know, in the beginning of this meeting, I saw all of us stood up, put our hands over our heart, talked about liberty and justice for all, and all that." I said, "I believe in that." I said, "You guys just stood up indicating you believed in that." I went into the thing about it. I said, "That exam, you all know, I'm not telling you nothing you don't know, that the opportunity was there to cheat on it and people did cheat and some didn't. That's not the point. The point is, it's civil service in this fire department and the city had an obligation to prevent people from being able to cheat on the exam." I said, "That's where I'm focusing on and I don't think my union should be siding with the city in defending that." Some of the guys got up and tried to speak to justifying what they were doing and finally the president said, "That's enough, let's just vote." Obviously, they voted, you know, on what they were doing, what they did.

Firefighters would complain to me. Some of them would come to the meetings and complain. A lot of them would call me. What I would do too is a lot of times, I tried to communicate with every member at least every month or two at the longest. If they weren't coming to the meeting, I would call them. We had about almost eighty members at the time and I got to where I recognized any of their voices on the phone as soon as they said one or two words. Because their obligation was I wanted them to come to meetings, but I knew that some wouldn't or whatever, but I wanted them to know. I wanted to hear what's going on with them.

One of the things that wasn't too popular, I stopped the drinking after the meeting. We stopped that and it was funny, one of the members, after I had been president for a little over a year, just barely a year, he came to me and he said—Jimmie Braden, if you know him, he's kind of one of these guys that's real vocal, loud, *hrrr rrr rrhhh*, you know, and he's kind of a big guy too. He

used to talk about the executive board and even before he said, "All you guys want to do is party and picnic, picnic and party." He would say it and different people would pick up on that and they knew how Jimmie was. He'd say, "Yeah, that's all you're doing." That was before we took over. He was complaining about it. So this black firefighter called me one day and said, "Bob." He said, "I know how you feel about partying and picnic," he said, "But the brothers need a break." He said, "You've been having the brothers fight and they need a break." So he was kind of hesitant about bringing it up to me, and so I laughed and I said, "Okay, well, let's do a dance."

So we did a dance and by that time, in the community, a lot of people had come to know us too because one of the things I really wanted to do was support other organizations. We did that a lot. So we had the dance. It was funny, Chief Casper and his wife, we invited them, they showed up, but it was interesting, when I pulled up—again, when you asked me why I didn't want to be president, even when I told you I wanted to be a scientist, I always visualized myself in the lab by myself, maybe with one other person, not a lot of people—but when I pulled up to go into the dance, I saw all these people going in, some of them with fur coats and all that. I said, "Is this our dance?" I was intimidated to go there, into my own dance. It was the biggest dance by far we had. Like I said, Chief Casper and his wife showed up. It was funny because his wife, at one point, I bought them a drink. I said, "Here's to our department, Chief." His wife said, "You're in the department, Bob?" I said yeah. She said, "Oh, I thought you were one of the City-Hall types." I don't know where that came from. [both laugh] So, we used to have dances, which were really pretty large.

Then, I got to thinking about a lot of the kids in the black community, particular at Hunters Point and stuff. They spent their whole summer there; didn't go camping, didn't go anywhere. They didn't even go to Golden Gate Park and stuff, just in their neighborhood. I talked the guys into it. I said, "Well, why don't we give a picnic? One of the guys recommended we have it down in San Mateo County, at some park. They had a pool, all kind of stuff. I thought about it and I said okay. Before, like I told you, they used to give them little picnics, twenty-five members only. I thought about it and I said, "What we can do is we need to charge just enough so that particularly some of the single parents and stuff, that they don't feel like they've been given anything." I said, "Why don't we just charge \$2 for kids and \$5 for the adults, and give them a chance to get out of the city?" That was one of the things I was really proud of because what we did was I had the seniors, Dr. Davis' place in San Francisco, paid them to make the potato salad and put it in these coolers. We paid them and they made the potato salad. At one point, we had over 700 people that would show up to our picnics. I wanted to charge them so that they wouldn't feel like they would be given nothing. A couple of the members, like I said that were out there, "Oh you know, Bob, we can make more money." I said, "We're not an organization to try and make money." I had to fight with them, you know, we can charge \$10. I said, "Okay, if we

charge them this, we're having this picnic right before school starts again." I said, "Some of these parents are trying to get money to get stuff for their kids to start school; they can't afford that kind of stuff." I had to continue to fight with some of them to keep the price down.

The other thing was that I wanted to make sure that everybody had enough to eat. People would always take doggie bags home and stuff, but what we did was we set up different games for adults and kids. We had sack races and all that kind of stuff for kids. Also, we had a raffle we'd start weeks before and one of the prizes was a trip to Las Vegas and stuff, pretty nice prizes. This one guy, like I said—well, if we're going to tell the story, we have to tell it. Audry Lee, he was my vice president and I always got the indication that to me, he seemed more interested in himself. He always thought that somebody was doing something, was something in it for them. In fact, Jimmy Dunson, the one I was telling you about that passed away, we didn't think he was going to get promoted because he hadn't done that well but he was one of the real soldiers. Like I said, he was like one of my right-hand people and I used to call him Jiminy Cricket. because he was always like, "I can't believe I can trust Bob." I would tease him about it. So anyway, he said that Audry came to him several times and said, "What's in it for you?" He said, "What do you mean what's in it?" He said, "I'm trying to help other people." He would never accept that because his mind wasn't geared that way.

Some of them guys wouldn't come directly to me with stuff because I didn't have a lot of patience when they came with stuff that wasn't right. So he apparently went to Jimmy Dunson and it looked like we were going to lose money on the raffle. He told Jimmy Dunson, "Well, we ought to rig the raffle so that one of us, like I can win, so we don't have to pay the price." When Jimmy told me that I said, "Now let's just look at the logic of this; we're doing this stuff for the community so we're going to cheat the community?" I said, "How does that equate?" One reason I asked him to run, when the rest of the executive board positions became available, I asked him to run for vice president and the reason I asked him because he was the fourth black in the fire department, so he had some history. I wanted to be able to rely on him in terms of when we were in discussions about things that happened or how things were before minorities came in the department. So that's why I asked him. I said, "Well, the only problem I have is you seem to be busy with a lot of other stuff, and it's going to take a lot of time." He said, "Well, I'll find the time to do the things I want to do." I said, "Well do you want to do this?" He said yes and so I supported him and he became the vice president. That was hard. The other thing that we did, you're familiar with Marcus Book Stores?

02-02:12:36

Farrell:

Mm-hmm.

02-02:12:37

Demmons:

Okay. We would go to Marcus Book Stores and buy a thousand, couple thousand dollars, worth of books for adults and kids and gave those away as prizes. Then the other thing we did was we bought a lot of book bags with school supplies. This was way back then and I see a lot of people are doing that now, which is great, but that's what we would do. We would have all these different contests. The adults would have a domino contest and we'd give them a prize, but generally, everybody got something, you know what we had, prizes. Some of the politicians wanted to come to our picnics and stuff too, so I was really, really proud of that.

It was interesting, one of the guys, a civilian, he was a beautician, and there was some issue that we had going on and so he came by. By that time we had an office. He came by the office he says, "Bob, you need to get the community to do that. You've got a lot of support around here, giving away all that barbecue and stuff. Now people know that. You guys are giving that stuff away. People really enjoyed it." One of the member's daughter, later on, he said that she was saying how that got her into reading because she got a book from the picnic. It was a lot of fun. That was something I enjoyed. I put the different people to work. Some of them, it gave me a chance to get some work out of some of them I couldn't get to do anything else, but they would help put the picnic together.

02-02:14:47

Farrell:

Well I think that's probably a good place to leave it today and then we'll resume on Thursday and talk a little bit more.

02-02:14:52

Demmons:

Okay. I've talked so much, now you want to have a fifth session. [both laugh]

Interview 3: July 29, 2016

03-00:00:06

Farrell:

All right. This is Shanna Farrell back with Robert Demmons on Friday, July 29, 2016 in Oakland, California. This is our third interview for the San Francisco Fire Department, California Firefighters oral history project. Robert, when we left off last time we were talking about your time working with the Black Firefighters Association and some of the work that you did in the organization and becoming president and pushing the agenda forward, the transition from it being more of a social organization, to being more of an advocacy organization. I'm wondering if you could tell me a little bit about how you started interacting with the media in order to convey the issues that you were working on to the public?

03-00:01:01

Demmons:

Okay. The first months, years even, we weren't able to get any coverage at all from the media, not even the *Sun Reporter*, as you know, which is an African American newspaper. I attributed that a lot to the advertisements. A lot of media depend on advertisers and stuff. The Black Firefighters, we didn't have—obviously, computers weren't around then. We printed up a lot of flyers. In fact, there was a place in Berkeley, right by UC Berkeley, that we used to go to all the time and the guys there knew us. We'd go there and print up copies of messages that we wanted to get out and we had an extensive mailing list of a lot of the organization, politicians, senators, the whole works, and we would send it out. And community organizations, like I said, we would hand them out. We'd have picketing City Hall for months and months and we passed out there, primarily there, but a lot of other places too, and to the members of the different organizations. We did that for a lot of months. We spent a lot of money just making copies and so that's how we got the word out as best we could in those days.

After going on television with Belva Davis's program, "All Together Now," we did start to get some coverage in the media. What happened was when we really started advocating for women to come into the department, then that gave us an opportunity to really get media people. Plus, some of the people that we started forming coalitions with, like the Civil Rights Coalition, some of those individuals who had some influence with media people. We started to, once we got into federal court, I guess, with Eva Paterson and the rest, that's when we started to get coverage primarily.

There were several steps. One was when we formed a coalition with the women that were trying to enter the department; that was the big move. We started getting coverage there, and then when we brought the other groups into the coalition, the Asian, Hispanic and other groups in, we started to get coverage. But things really, really took off when the swastika showed up. Things really took off and in fact, I didn't know such a thing existed but apparently, the publishers and editors meet every year to try to decide what editorials they're going to have, and I wasn't even aware of that. So they

called me in for that and in fact, Mayor Feinstein was there also, but they wanted to talk about the fire department. They interviewed me about things in the fire department. Following that, we noticed that we got a lot of editorial coverage, things, but the big thing with the media in those days too was the columnists where they can write things even if they're not true. I found that out the hard way.

There was one particular person, Guy Wright—in fact we nicknamed him Guy Wrong because some of the firefighters would just feed stuff to him that they knew weren't true and he'd put it out there like it was gospel. That was one of the things that we had to deal with was things that were being published that weren't accurate.

Then, when I got to where I could tell pretty much where a reporter where they were coming from. In other words, I could tell if they were going to be biased against us and I could tell and I would say different things. For instance, I was being interviewed by a reporter once and while his camera person was setting up, I made some statement to him, just to see how he would react. I noticed that he sort of tensed up. I wasn't familiar with him, that's why I had to do that. It sort of put me in a position to be ready for anything that come my way, and so I was there. As soon as I sat down, the first thing out of his mouth he says, "Demmons, there are a lot of people saying the Black Firefighters is a separatist organization. What do you say to that?" I said, "Well, the department has 1,600 uniformed firefighters, only seventy of us are black." I said, "There are 220 lieutenants and only three blacks, there's eighty captains, one black, forty battalion chiefs, no blacks, seventeen assistant chiefs, no blacks, two deputies and a chief not black." I said, "It sounds like to me, the department is practicing separatism." I was kind of able to respond because I didn't relax too much when he started the interviewing. That was one of the things.

Then we had a radio personality, Bernie Ward. He had two brothers that was familiar with and one was in the fire department and another one had been a deputy city attorney. He would be on the radio all the time, giving information. He was on a talk program, KGO I think it was, and he would give out a lot of false and misinformation. One night, I called him and he said, "Oh, we've got Demmons on the radio." When he was interviewing me, I said, "Bernie Ward, there's a Ward in the fire department, are you related?" I knew, but when I said are you related, he said, "That's my brother." I said, "Also, there used to be a deputy city attorney that was representing the city against our charges, Ward." He said, "Yeah, that's my brother too." We kept talking and I sort of had him back on his heels. He would say stuff that wasn't accurate, so I really got to him when I said, "You know I'm surprised that you're not more familiar with the truth of what's going on in the fire department being you have a brother in there." He said, "Leave my brother out of it!" he screams. Then later on, after I got off, a few people called him up and I remember one elderly sounding woman called him up and said,

"Bernie, I'm surprised at you. You've been on the radio all this time, talking about the fire department and you never divulged the fact that you have a brother in the fire department." She was just giving it to him, and some other people called up. So we had to deal with that.

I guess one of the big problems is, as I said before, who disliked firefighters? You're going to find maybe one person out of a million because firefighters do perform a very valuable service. You go to a person, someone's house, and there may be a medical condition, and you help save someone's life that way, or a fire and stuff, and so you know. I'll give you an example. We had a civil service or a fire commission meeting, one of them, and we were discussing some problems and the union brought this African American woman to the meeting. What had happened was her son was fishing off of a pier behind Station 25 on Third Street and fell in the water and one of the firefighters ran out and rescued him. Naturally, if they asked her to come down and say positive things and speak out against us, she's going to do it; they saved her son. We were faced with a lot of that.

It was always interesting to me too, how the firefighters, even some of the ones that were considered very racist and stuff, they really didn't hesitate to do their job in the community, put their life on the line. That was always puzzling to me for a while, but then I come to realize that again, they like to be heroes but they don't want you to be part of the team. That was a big thing. I mean, base that with the toy program, where they give toys to the needy, which is a wonderful thing, but that's what took a lot of education, to educate the public, what actually was going on in the fire department internally and what efforts were being made to exclude certain people. Some of the people knew that and obviously, in the black community, they knew that years ago, that's how WACO [Western Addition Community Organization] came about, but it was still hard.

When I looked at things, there were three areas we had to deal with. One was hiring, the second promotion, and the third was harassment. What we found was that the public was more willing to help out dealing with the harassment than with the other two. A lot of people would look at it and say, "Well yeah, I'd like to get hired for different jobs too," and, "Yeah, I'd like to get promoted on my job." They didn't really understand. But really, even if they understand, they weren't going to put a lot of effort into supporting you, that you may need. What happened was the department was always trying to come up with different ways, obviously, to defend itself. What they did was they came up with the idea to have mediation sessions. We knew that what they wanted to do was they weren't willing to do anything to improve the hiring, to bring about more diversity. We knew for sure they weren't going to do anything to give opportunity for minorities to be promoted and the only thing that we felt they wanted to do was to mediate and them come up with some solutions to the harassment. But our position was the solution to the harassment was to totally integrate the department because we couldn't have

like an apartheid system where you have all the officers and chief officers or no people of color there. That would never work. That was our position and we knew that they wanted to be able to say, "We came up with a solution for the harassment, put it all out in the mediation and maybe take some of the heat off of the department and the mayor and so forth." So we knew that.

What they did was, we had a new fire commissioner come aboard, a Japanese American. Her husband was Ed Howden and her name was Ann Howden. He was a federal mediator and apparently had a good reputation around the country. He mediated a lot of Native American problems and situations. He was like, as I understood it, like the top gun, you know. He was going to be the mediator, and so the different groups were the Black Firefighters, the administration, the Chiefs Officers Association, the union, and the Asian Firefighters and Hispanic Firefighters. It was supposed to be three on the different teams. Boy, you see we're outnumbered already. There was just three black firefighters and then you had three members of the Chiefs Association, three members of the union, three members of the administration, and you know that was all one group as far as we were concerned.

What I did was I went and I got three or four books on mediation and I started reading up on the mediation process. Later what we did was there was a mediation school or whatever, class, in Marin County, and we set up a mock mediation session with members of that class. It was amazing because there was one elderly woman and she played the role of the president of the union, Jim Ferguson, and if I'd have closed my eyes and had a voice change, I would have thought she was Jim Ferguson. We went through the mock mediation and we realized that certain things had to be in place and that the other side was going to try to mediate the harassment first and so forth. We also realized that we could go through the mediation process and even if they agreed to something, the city attorney could step in or the mayor could step in and say, "No, that's not acceptable." We knew we had to get a commitment from Mayor Feinstein and some other people that they would honor any agreements that came out of the mediation. We also knew that before we went into mediation, we wanted to change the agenda. Not to change the agenda, but change the order of the things. We wanted to mediate entry level first, then go to promotions, and then go to harassment. We knew that they would want to go to the harassment first because we felt that they were going to try to mediate the harassment. But they're going to leave the same structure in place and then say when we got into the entry level, they were going to say, "Well, the mediation broke down but we were able to accomplish something with the rest." We knew that, so that's another reason.

From reading, I found out that you should always have a group outside of the mediation session before you agree to anything, to go and meet with them and run it by them so that they would be more objective than you being worn down in the stuff in the mediation and agreeing to something that really is not in your best interests. Like I said, we learned a lot of that reading all these

books on mediation. It was interesting, Ed Howden, he would call me and I read where it says you should meet on neutral ground, that's one of the things you do. He wanted to meet at the drill tower and he would call me up and say, "Well Bob, they have all the nice facilities for parking there, we can have coffee." Plus, in one of the books I read, it said you shouldn't even drink anything in the mediation session. It was interesting, to be reading that stuff.

03-00:19:07

Farrell: Yeah.

03-00:19:09

Demmons: But he was saying they have coffee there. He was giving me all this pitch about why it was great and I'm saying, he's a mediator, he should know we shouldn't be meeting on the fire department grounds. He would keep me on the phone for over an hour, I mean really long time periods, and just trying to wear me down on the phone on different stuff. Finally one day I said, "I need to get him off of me." I said, "Ed, I found this great place where we can mediate." He said, "Where is that, Bob?" I said, "100 Whitney Young Circle." He says, "Is that in Hunters Point?" I said, "Yeah, right at the top of the hill, at Hunters Point." I said, "They have plenty of parking." I started giving him all that stuff he was giving me. The very next day, the very next day, he found a place down by the wharf, a union building—not the IAFC Building but another real plush office and stuff—the very next day. This had been going on for a couple weeks. [laughs] We went in to the mediation but we knew that we had to give them a list first. I had to tell him that we wanted to speak first because we wanted certain things. We wanted something from the mayor before, so we weren't going to mediate that day, we knew that. Going through the mock session, we knew I had to give them that first, otherwise they start moving to having the administration talk and the union talk, and we know all that. We did all of that and we had already said that we were going to walk out after that. I gave them all the stuff and I told them I wanted to speak first, so he honored that. I spoke and I said, "Before we go into mediation, we need a commitment from the mayor and from the city attorney's office and so forth, and this is the order in which we want to mediate things." I gave them all of that. When I stood up, the other two guys stood up and so the three of us walked out. They were like trying to stop us. We left and we also told them where we would be and we went over to one of the other guy's houses. We waited and said, "When you get this stuff we'll mediate."

We left and we went there and it was like, they were like shocked; they couldn't believe we did that. Earl Gage was part of the administration and he was saying later, "I wish you'd have included me in that." But they were all shocked because we walked out on the chiefs of the department and stuff and nothing like had ever been done. They really couldn't believe we did that. So, Curtis McClain, who was on the fire commission—I think I mentioned him before—he was the treasurer or secretary for the ILWU [International Longshore and Warehouse Union]. He's African American. He called the

number and said, "Can I come over and talk to you guys?" We said yeah, so we was at this guy's house and he came over. He said, "That really shook everybody up when you guys walked out." And so we did, we got a letter from the mayor and then we started the mediation session, but they continued to try to not give up anything, tried to continue to change the order. They wanted to go to harassment and we're talking about entry level and kept explaining to them, saying, "Well, if you bring enough people in the department, bring about the diversity the department needs, in the hiring and the promotions, the harassment will go away. You don't have to worry about it." Obviously, we knew they weren't willing to move. The only thing they wanted to talk about, willing to do, was talk about recruitment, you know, recruitment, recruitment, we'll do that. But we knew also they had never done a good job in recruitment. As I mentioned before, that's why we started our own recruitment program.

Eventually, the mediation sessions broke down and we didn't get anywhere with that. We started to mediate a few days after we walked out. In fact, they found another place. It wasn't the same place, but it was neutral ground, so we mediated there for several days, with no results.

03-00:24:18

Farrell:

Around what year is this, because this is leading up to the consent decree, right? So it's in the '80s?

03-00:24:25

Demmons:

This was before the federal lawsuits, so it had to be like '79, '80, somewhere around in that area.

03-00:24:33

Farrell:

Okay, so it's well before that. I guess I do have one last question about the media. I know that Belva Davis had been there with the coverage. Did she approach you or were you approaching her?

03-00:25:00

Demmons:

What happened was, as I mentioned before, when we went up to the BAPAC [Black American Political Association of California] meeting—that was the black organization, political organization—so they had all of these politicians and other people from all over the state. It still goes on. We went up there and that's when we were passing out [flyers]. Belva Davis and Joanne Lewis, who was the director of the Fair Employment and Housing, they were in a booth together. They had all these booths, where you'd go. We had already met Joanne Lewis and so Belva Davis was there with her. We stopped and obviously, was talking with her. So that's how we met Belva. When Belva got back, she contacted us and asked us, because we were giving out information too. Plus, Joanne Lewis, I'm sure was telling her about what was going on. So that's when she had us on her program. She had a producer who worked for—well, she was her producer, and that was Francee Covington, who is the fire commission president now. She was Belva's producer and we had several

meetings. Then, a lot of the other times I was on TV, on the show, she just interviewed me. The first time, she interviewed me and several other black firefighters.

It was interesting, the first time, we were all there in a group, and Francee Covington was questioning us. After we were finished, one of the black firefighters said, "Is this going to be on TV?" I said, "Yeah, what do you think we've been doing?" He said, "Well I can't be on," and so she tried to talk him into it. He did not want to go on television. We had to do the whole thing over again. The first time was the best session, but it was interesting how resistant he was in terms of not wanting to go on TV. He wasn't the only one, there was a lot. But, I don't know what he thought when we were sitting there talking. After that, we did get some coverage, but a lot of times we still didn't get the coverage. For instance, the first time we had a demonstration against the department—picketed—they used to have a program one of the firefighters had put together, a chili cook-off, where they raised money. They did it down by the wharf, raised money for a burn unit and stuff, which is a good program.

One of the black firefighters, with his brother in-law, he went up to the booth in the station where he worked. I never had any complaints from him about how he was treated at the station. He worked at Station 2, over in Chinatown. Police were in some of them because they were friends and relatives, so evidently there was at least one police officer that was in the booth with the people at his station. I'm sure you're aware, they have a few alcoholic beverages while they're doing this stuff too. He was there with his two daughters and one of his daughters was about two years old and the other one was like four, and so he was there with them and his brother in-law.

Apparently, something happened where his brother in-law was asking for a drink or something, and apparently the cops came up and they jumped on him, the firefighters, and they jumped on the firefighter. And in fact, he was holding one of his daughters in his arms when they jumped on them and his other daughter got stepped on. He had to take her to the hospital because they injured her foot, the four year-old. One of the firefighter's wives apparently, while they were beating this firefighter up—and he was supposed to be one of their friends—while they was beating him up, he still had his daughter in his arms, so one of the other firefighter's wives came and grabbed the daughter, the two year-old.

At that time, we were doing recruitment, the Black Firefighters. We had gotten an office and we were recruiting out of the office. The next week, that next Saturday, I called a special meeting and so a lot of the guys came to the office. Quite a few black firefighters said we ought to get some guns and we ought to do this. They were coming with all kinds of violent stuff, get some axes and all kind of stuff. I already knew what I wanted to do because that Saturday was fire prevention weekend and they were having a big thing at the Division of Training where every year they invite the community in, give

them hotdogs, kids hotdogs, all kinds of stuff, and show them the different apparatus and stuff. So, it's right next to—if you're familiar with the Division of Training, it's right next to Fire Station 7. I knew that when the first group of minorities came in off that list, in '74, the first class, that a lot of the firefighters and the union members had picketed the Division of Training. I said, 'Well, we need to set up a picket sign there.' I instructed the Black Firefighters not to go in front of the fire station but just stay in front of the Division of Training.

What had happened was, before I did that, I wanted the firefighter and his brother in-law, they came to the meeting, and I wanted him to file a police report because I didn't trust him in terms of following through and I felt that he would probably, when the pressure was on him, he would say no, he didn't want to demonstrate. I didn't want him to do that, you know, and I didn't want to put the association out there on the line without having his support. Some of the guys didn't want the police report to be filed, so I wanted it on the record that he complained before I got the association out there. His brother in-law was willing, he was all willing, and so some of the guys were resisting. I had one of the black firefighters that I trusted, the one I told you about that passed away, but I had him go with him to make sure he did it. They went to the police station because our office was over on Randolph Street, over on the side of City College, over that way, and so there's a police station there on San Jose, right near that park right there. I told them to go there and so they went and when they came back. I found out he had filed a complaint with the police, then I told him my suggestion. I said, "They're having that fire prevention thing. We need to go down there and tell them to prevent this racism and stuff that's going on in the department." I said, "We're going to go picket."

At the time, there was about thirty or so Black Firefighters in there and one of the guys did construction work, so he had these little wooden sticks. We got some paper, you know, things, and we were making picket signs. I was printing up my sign and one of the guys said, "Bob." He says, "Who's going to carry these signs [with] all these guys are leaving?" I looked up and the office had thinned out. Guys were taking off, they didn't want to go picket. It turned out that only twelve of us went out of the thirty-something that was there and the guys that were talking all tough were some of the main ones that got out of there. They were saying stuff, you know, they knew we weren't going to down there with axes and stuff, you know they were just saying that stuff to try to look tough or whatever, but they were some of the first ones that left. I looked around and they were gone. They didn't even have enough courage to picket. Like I said there were only twelve of us. We notified the press and we didn't get any response. There was one reporter that did show up, a young reporter, and I don't remember what station he was with now, but he showed up. We were picketing, so nobody from the community would cross in our picket line. The guys were steaming. They had polished up the rigs, cooked all those hotdogs and stuff, and so eventually, they just left

because nobody from the community—and like, some of their families were there, and wives, and they were just saying all kinds of nasty stuff to us. That was one of the things.

One of the black firefighters, he was a Vietnam vet called me a few days later and he said, “Bob, you guys picketed.” Because again, we were all firefighters, you know, we picketed, so we’re speaking out against the administration and that’s a big move. That was a big move for us that was the first time we did that. He says, “I’ll tell you,” he says, “I was working. I had to work.” He says, “I’m glad I was working because I don’t think I would have had enough courage to get out there with you guys.” He said, “That’s like going on one of those recon patrols in Vietnam where you don’t expect to come back, you know.” It was interesting because I worked out of that station, Station 7. That next Monday I went to work and the division chief that I was driving, he had problems in the way he treated people but he wasn’t liked by the white firefighters either because he was kind of big. He was buff and he would kind of intimidate people and stuff, so there wasn’t a lot of love for him. He wanted to be chief, so he saw, in my opinion, a way to be chief was to get in with me, you know, get my support. He treated me well. When I went to work that Monday morning, he said “Bob.” He said, “Take the buggy over to the radio shop,” and said they were having some problem with the radio because I have some things to do. He pointed to the board and all the guys had signed out of the meals because they didn’t want to eat with me, and that’s what he was saying, doing some talking.

When I came back to the station—he had said something to them when I was there but anyway—when I came back to the station, the captain of the station, one of the captains, he lived in Marin. He was Hispanic—Gary—and he had come in off-duty. The chief asked me, “Do you mind talking with him and a couple other guys?” I said, “Yeah, sure, I’ll talk with them.” So we went in an office and we were talking and one of the guys that was there, I didn’t even realize it, but he had the same last name—his father was a battalion chief and I drove this battalion chief for years. I never knew that that was his son, I didn’t know the guy was his son. He was in there and he was talking about how we were picketing the firehouse and all that. I said, “No, we weren’t picketing the firehouse, we were picketing the entire fire department.” I said, “We didn’t walk in front of the station.” I said, “Besides, the way I got the idea was when orders came in.” In ’74, people were picketing and one of the guys that was doing the big complaining, he said, “Yeah, I was one of the guys picketing.” I said, “Oh, so you were picketing, it was okay, but when we were picketing, it’s not okay.”

The captain, Gary Torres, he was saying about how bad it was that we were demonstrating and all that stuff. He was just going on. When he finished talking I said, “Well first of all, the way they were treating that firefighter, Jerry, jumping on him, injuring one of his daughters and stuff like that,” I said, “You should have been out there picketing with us.” I said, “And the

other thing is,” I said “I don’t think that the reason you came here because you so upset about us picketing.” I said, “I think the reason that you came in here is because you’re trying to win points with the white guys that you’re supervising here in this station.” We talked some more and the assistant Chief, Ray Landi is his name, he said, ‘Well, we need to just end the conversations.’” He says, “All I’m telling you captain—” he’s talking to the captain—he says, “I’m telling you as the captain, I want you to deal with this problem here in this station.” He said, “Furthermore, I agree with Bob. I think you are just trying to win some points with the guys.” So that was a thing. That was interesting because he took that position and not long after that, he went to another assignment.

That’s when they brought in the chief that I had the biggest problems with who was Korbus. Chief [William] Korbus, he took over. The first day that he was there, he said, “I want to meet with you in the office,” I said yeah. I went in and the two officers, the officer of the truck and the officer of the engine were in the meeting too. When I got in there, he laid all of these things about he didn’t want me conducting Black Firefighters business on duty. He wanted to approve all of my trades. Whenever I made a trade, he wanted to approve it. He didn’t want me to trade with this guy Joe Morrison, who was the only person that would trade with me. He was a black firefighter. And several other things that was part of my complaining. After he finished saying that and I said, “Well, would you put that down in the journal?” He said, “Yeah, I plan to.” He said, “And I’m going to have these officers do it too.” I said okay. I said, “Well then, put me off-duty.” He says, “Oh, you want to go off on disability?” I said, “No, I’m not disabled.” I said, “I don’t want to go off on disability.” I said, “I just don’t want to work with you because I feel that my life can be in danger, working under your supervision with the attitude you have toward me.” I said, “I don’t want you sending me in some fire and I have to second guess whether you’re really concerned about my safety or not.” He said, “Oh, you’re going too far.” He said he wouldn’t do it. I said, “Well, I request to speak with the chief,” and he said well—and that’s when— see, Chief [Emmett] Condon, out of all the chiefs that I worked under, I found him to be the most credible and had the most backbone. He would go against stuff that he knew was wrong. He’d hold his deputies, anybody, accountable. His son was one of my deputies. Rich Condon—I never known him to tell me something that wasn’t true. If he said something, he would follow through on it. He said, “Well he’s probably too busy.” He thought [and] he said, “Well you can see the deputy, that’s where he’s in the chain of command.” I said that’s fine. So I told him, I said tell the deputy I want—I was still in the union. I said, “I want either the union president or the grievance chairman in the meeting, and I also want Earl Gage,” [who was] supposed to be handling EEO stuff in the meeting.

The thing about it was, in that very office where we was, right on the other side, in our workroom, one of the lieutenants that was in that meeting, had the workroom full of televisions and radios that he personally worked on, on duty,

in that building. He's telling me he don't want me to do Black Firefighters business. Then they had another little small room and it had a freezer-refrigerator in there. Another firefighter was selling meat; he kept his meat in that firehouse. So you see where I'm going. But he don't want me to—because I didn't conduct Black Firefighters business on duty anyway, but I mean him telling me that, you know. On the way down to headquarters, he was making small talk and stuff and I was making small talk back to him. I could tell he was getting nervous about it. We got to the deputy's office, so we were all in the meeting and so the deputy says, "Do you want to tell us what this is about, Bob?" I said, "Have him tell you how it started." He didn't want to do it and so I was really trying to—I wanted to get him to the point to where hopefully, he'd be embarrassed not to tell the truth. I said, "Okay, I'll tell you since he seems to be too afraid to tell you what he did." And he wouldn't even look at me, the assistant chief, Korbus. He wouldn't even look at me. We were all across from the deputy and I started tell him, "You know what he told me." He said, "Well, let's go over them one-by-one." He said, "Well you know the rulebook says that everybody's supposed to get their trades approved by the officers." I said, "Yeah, I know what the rulebook says, but I also know what the practice is." I said, "Also, I know for sure none of the other operators have to get their trades approved." I said, "And I'm not going to sit still for selective enforcement of the rules on me. Now if all the rest of the operators do it, I'll do it. If they're not doing it, I'm not going to do it." We got into the point where he didn't want me to trade with Joe Morrison because he didn't want to work with Joe. He was saying, "Well, it has nothing to do with race." He says, "Even if Joe was from some village in Germany, or somewhere," where his people were from, "I still wouldn't want to work with him." So that's what that is, and we went over all the other things, and not Black Firefighters business and all that stuff.

So, after that, the deputy said, "Well, Bob, do you want to move to another assignment?" I said, "No, move him." I said, "I can work with anyone, he's the one that has the problem with working with people." I said "In fact, you ought to take him out of the field and bring him down here to the headquarters until he learns how to work with people." I said, "The department is spending a lot of money bringing these consultants in here, trying to teach us how to work together and here you have an assistant chief telling someone he can't work with him here because he don't like him or something?" I said, "No, move him." When I said that the deputy, all of a sudden he just started laughing, and so we were all looking at him like what's funny, nothing's funny. I mean he just, like he had been trying to hold it back and he just blurted it all out. He said, "Well, I've got to give it to you, Bob," he said, "You've got a lot of nerve, bringing an assistant chief down into headquarters." He said, "When I was chief operator back then there was no way in the world you could have gotten me to do nothing like that." Earl said, "Well, you know, this is a different breed now or something." So they were saying—the discussion got into about how, what was it, about whether Korbus was doing that because he was racist. The deputy was insinuating that he had

to be stupid or something, that's what he was insinuating. So Earl Gage said something and the way it came out, that he was indicating that Korbus wasn't racist but he was stupid, and so Korbus didn't like this and looked at Earl in a very intimidating way. Now all the stuff, and I said no. Earl started playing around, said now all the stuff I've been saying about him, and he hasn't even had to, you know. He never even looked my way, let alone look at me like he looked at Earl.

Eventually, they did move him but they left him in the field. I was on what they called a swing shift, that's what I was on, but they put him permanently in one of the other divisions, Division 2. They brought another assistant chief in there, in his spot, but he still had to do my evaluations. I go in the office—we relieved him when I went through that division—so I went in there one morning and he had left my evaluation out on the desk where anybody could see it. You know, firefighters cleaning up and just going in there, looking. So I looked and he had used the wrong evaluation form. He had used the one where you know, that I was involved in creating the performance appraisal system, so you know obviously, I was familiar with it. I looked and he had used the lieutenant's form and I was a chief's operator. So I said, "I'm going to fix him." I made a copy and then I put on there. [I wrote], "You used the wrong form," and left it right on the desk where he had left it before. He wasn't going to be back for a couple of days, so a lot of people would obviously get to see it because he had left it out there anyway. It was funny, my wife, when I brought it home and she saw it, she said, "Oh, what are you mad about? He's saying he looks at you as a lieutenant, not an operator."

So he changed the form and I forgot, because I had driven him before, before he came into that spot after we had picketed. In that meeting, when we were meeting with the deputy he says, "Well, I have no problem with Bob." He said, "In fact, he's the best operator that I've ever had." He says, "He's the one that, in the mornings, I trust him to do the stuff without looking over his shoulder." He said, "I can go and have a cup of coffee, and he's the only operator I ever had that I have enough confidence in, that I'd do that." So he's saying all this stuff about me, and now I look at my evaluation and it was all average stuff. I wrote a thing in the file. I said, "Well, he said I'm an outstanding operator, so why am I just getting average, instead of one or two steps above?" So I filed a thing in retaliation. I guess they told him to go on vacation or something, and he left. Anyway, that was just part of the stuff that I had with Korbus.

03-00:52:27

Farrell:

Can you tell me a little bit about the events leading up to the lawsuit that would eventually usher in the consent decree?

03-00:52:37

Demmons:

Well, as I was saying before, I filed a protest that Monday following the Saturday, and there were many protests. A lot of the firefighters were

protesting individual questions on the test. Following that, when Bob Gnaizda refused to do anything, Jimmie Braden and I went around to different lawyers offices, all over the Bay Area; Oakland, near Berkeley. We went all over the place, obviously all over San Francisco, trying to get legal representation. In fact, it was interesting when Eva Paterson and the other attorneys were filing for their fees, apparently they have to justify, those nonprofits, have to justify taking on a case because apparently, they want people to go and get lawyers, and not necessarily public interest lawyers. They wanted them to go get lawyers that, it's like taking money from other lawyers if you just jump in and represent people. They had to prove that we had a hard time getting representation, that's why they had to take over. That's why they got involved themselves because usually what they do is find other attorneys to represent you. That's what Eva was—that's what the lawyers committee—that's how they work and that's how they operate.

So, when I was going over the stuff with Eva, it was over thirty attorneys that she was coming up with. I said yeah, we went to them, we went to them, and when I looked it was about—because I didn't realize because I was so busy trying to get help, it was over thirty attorneys around the Bay Area that we had gone to, law firms and attorneys, trying to get help. But one of the big things was, like I said before, it takes a lot of money to take the city on. They have a bottomless pit of funds that they get from the taxpayers, and they have a hundred or so attorneys, and then they can bring more in if they need them. So these law firms, you know they're not going to get out there. They can go broke just answering briefs and stuff. I didn't realize that at the time, but I came to realize that, that's why we couldn't get them to come onboard and to help us.

I told you how we filed with the DFEH, so I was looking at trying to find out where we could file and get help. At the time, they had what they called the Office of Revenue Sharing. Part of their policy is if someone files a discrimination complaint and they're found that they did discriminate, then if they had received any federal funds—I think it was for the prior five years—they had to give all of that money back. It wasn't if they were found guilty, they couldn't correct it, they had to just give that money back. That was a powerful hammer. So I was reading all these books, and I found that out.

We filed with the Office of Revenue Sharing against the city. What happened was, they weren't moving fast and when they finally did send me an answer, I requested a copy of the city's response. Eventually, they finally did send me that. When I read it, I saw that part of it was deleted and I said, "I want to see what they deleted." I contacted an attorney, Chris Redburn, when he was with the—he wrote and asked them for that part that was deleted. In the meantime, I had established communications with some of the people that worked in the Office of Revenue Sharing and one of the guys who worked there, he came out to San Francisco and interviewed us but then he later got killed in an automobile accident in Texas somewhere, so his supervisor got to the point. I

guess I bugged people a lot. He got to where he recognized my voice, okay, out of all the people in the country. He told me that they had a woman in Washington, D.C., that was looking at suing the Office of Revenue Sharing because they were dragging their feet. A lot of this was under Ed Meese's administration, so he gave me her contact information, Rosalind Gray, and I called her. I started sending her stuff, and so she helped too, to get them to give me that stuff that they withheld. When I read it, what it was was this deputy city attorney, Treadwell Phillips, was over at Revenue Sharing, so she had put in there that somebody in the city attorney's office—Deputy City Attorney Phyllis Walker—and said, "Oh, they used to work with you and told me to tell you hello," and putting all this personal stuff. In other words, "Hey, one of your friends is here on this," which is totally inappropriate and unprofessional. And so that's what they had blocked out and I had that information.

I went to Washington, D.C., and met with the supervisor because he got some of what we was going through. He was kind of helpful in doing stuff, which he really shouldn't have been doing I guess, but he was doing it. Me and the vice president went there and met Rosalind Gray. We went over some stuff. And then she told me, she says, "We have an office in San Francisco, you guys are going through hell back there." She says, "You know, we have an office back there, a lawyer's committee, civil rights office back there. There's a woman, she's assistant director, and you need to get in touch with her, Eva Paterson." I said, "Okay." When I got back, I called. She gave me Eva's number, so I called Eva. I don't know if you've ever met Eva.

03-01:00:32

Farrell: No.

03-01:00:34

Demmons: But Eva, she can go. When I called her, she says, "Oh, thanks very much for returning my call and what I want to know—" and she's talking, and I was like what is she talking about? She said what was going on, they had the Cleveland vanguard's case, firefighters case, and it was going before the Supreme Court or whatever, and she was filing an amicus brief. She wanted to know if we wanted to be part of that amicus brief and that's why she had called me the day before and I wasn't aware of that. After she slowed down and gave me a chance to talk, I said, "That's not why I called you." I told her why I called her and then obviously, we agreed to be part of the amicus brief. But then she said, "Okay, I'll find you an attorney." As I told you, that's what they do, is find attorneys. They don't normally represent people.

About the next year, really, I was bombarding her with different documentation, different stuff that was going on, for a whole year, for a whole year. I think it was after Jimmie Braden fell off the truck, or I don't remember if that was—but anyway, she called me one day. She said that she was in the BART station and had just finished the last batch of stuff I had sent her, and

said she just started crying, just openly crying, about what we was going through. She said that they were going to represent us until they find an attorney for us. So that's how that happened, and she got Bill MacNeill, to represent us, he was in private practice at the time, and so we started moving. Then, she called me one day and asked me—there was some people from the equal rights advocates, that were fighting to get women in the fire department, that wanted to meet with me and wanted to go over the particulars of the physical agility test to evaluate whether that's valid and stuff, that they have on the test. So I said sure. We set up a meeting. The department found out about it somehow, so the media was really trying to—so I guess they got the people in the media to try to get in on it. They were trying to find out where the meeting was going to be, so we didn't tell anybody. When I went to the meeting, Donna Hitchens and who else? Some other attorney from the equal rights. Donna later became a judge, and Nancy Davis was her partner, and she became a judge. So I met with them and we were going over the different stuff, and that's how we started really working with the women.

I had already started looking at the entire entry level examination and at the time, that last examination. When I looked at the data, there were 312 women that had taken the exam and the department had failed all 312 of them off of that exam. So I started putting it together, looking at different phases in terms of each group, how they did in each group. Like I said, that's when we started the coalition, eventually formed a coalition with the women that were trying to get in, and there was a lot of resistance. I think I went over some of that stuff with you before, how they were contacting the women.

03-01:04:56

Farrell: No.

03-01:04:58

Demmons: Oh, okay. Well, what happened was, once we started doing the coalition, it was interesting, for instance—

03-01:05:06

Farrell: Oh you mean the media had started contacting the women?

03-01:05:09

Demmons: No, City Hall.

03-01:05:10

Farrell: Oh, City Hall, okay.

03-01:05:11

Demmons: Civil service and the rest of them, trying to break the coalition up. As I started before, that gave us the extra hammer to be together because now you've got a department with no women, you're having these other problems with people of color not being in there. The city didn't want that obviously and particularly the women part, where no women qualified. Some of the departments, like Seattle and San Diego, and some of the other departments,

had women in their departments. San Francisco—big, liberal San Francisco—didn't have any women. So, that's when the press would talk to me a lot about stuff. As I stated before, one of the things when we started advocating and doing stuff for women, we started to get some media. For instance, there's a CD I have where I was on one of the TV news programs, where they were celebrating the anniversary, was it 100, whatever, of the Statue of Liberty, and it was a big thing, you remember that. So, one of the reporters evidently was interviewing me. I said that I was thinking about that if the Statue of Liberty came to life, that she wouldn't be able to get into the San Francisco Fire Department even though she's shown how strong she is by holding that torch up for all these years. They ran that on the news and the news reporters were laughing about it, and the ERA loved it. So, you know, I was doing stuff, getting media coverage like that, where I wasn't always just talking about Black Firefighters stuff. I was talking about women and other groups.

Don Pistolesi, who was over the exam process, he called me after because I had submitted a thing where I showed where each group, what the percent of drop-off would be at each phase of the exam process, for each group. After going through some of them, they saw that I was right on the money. I mean, I was right on target on each group; Asian, Hispanics, blacks, whites, everything, women. Each phase, from the written to the acknowledgement, to the written, what the drop-off rate would be from the written, to interviews, all that. He called me and he says, "Bob, what I can do is we can change the weight on some of the things." I'm saying, "What is he talking about?" But he went on, "That way we can get more blacks in there." I couldn't believe he was saying it. That's what he was offering to do, to get me to back off and stuff. Obviously, I wasn't going to go for no stuff like that. No, you don't change the scores on people who sit down and take a test, what are you doing? That just kind of led me to see what I was dealing with as far as civil service and what they'll do and what they probably have done to keep women and blacks and everybody else out. If you can do that for me, imagine, he's doing it for others, did that in the past, that's what the problem was.

Then, we were meeting with the women that were trying to come in and they started offering women selective certification. [They] said, "We will hire the women," because they wanted to get that heat off, break up the coalition. So, Anne Young, the one I told you about, she was really, really strong, in terms of trying to get the women to stay in the coalition, try to make them understand how important it was. The attorneys were obviously trying to do it. They even had a Black Firefighters' wife, who was arguing to essentially break the coalition, which surprised me, because her husband was very active in the Black Firefighters. A lot of work had to be done but the coalition stayed together.

Then, Eva called me one day because we had the suit with the DFEH, just the Black Firefighters, and none of the other minorities in the department were not going to be a part and join with us. Eva called me one day I was in the

office. She said, "What about the other groups, the Asians and Hispanics, whether the Black Firefighters feel like [letting them be] part of that suit?" I said, "Well, our position—" and I felt comfortable saying it without going to the membership, because if they said no, then I wasn't going to be the president any longer—but our position was that we wanted the department to reflect the community [of] San Francisco. So I said, "Yes, let's bring them in. Let's include them," even though I have one video where one of the Asian firefighters got before the fire commission and just went off, saying negative stuff about the Black Firefighters, and those guys are cry-babies and we don't want to be a part of them. He was just going on and on and on. I don't know if I told you about that one but anyway what happened was, John Keker. I don't know if you're familiar with Keker, but he was voted the number one attorney in the Bay Area. He was the one who prosecuted Ollie North years ago, a former Marine. His firm primarily represents other law firms. He was on the fire commission and Henry Berman was the president of the commission. They had just started a rule where you only had three minutes, or whatever they came up with, and that was mainly targeting the Black Firefighters and stuff, coming in the fire commission. So, limit, three, four minutes, but they let this guy go on for twenty minutes at least, maybe a half hour, blasting the Black Firefighter.

Now, he was the individual, so when I got up there, the president said, "Okay Bob, you have three minutes." I said, "Well, you didn't limit the prior speaker to three minutes. I'm representing an organization." He said, "You have three minutes, you can use it." I said, "That's okay, I'll use my three minutes somewhere else," and I went back. And so he knew what I meant by somewhere else, the media that's what, if I can't talk here. He said, "Well you've got three minutes." I said, "I'll tell you, I don't have nothing to say to you." John Keker started jumping on the president, Henry Berman, about how he was treating me. I said, "Whoa, I've never seen no commission do that, especially in an opening meeting like that."

03-01:13:33

Farrell:
Demmons:

Mm-hmm.

03-01:12:34

So that kind of made me look at John. I said this guy, you know, for him to do that. Anyway, just an interesting story, a sideline. About two weeks after that article came out and they listed all the attorneys and they had John Keker's picture. There was a big picture of him on the front part of the section and it said he was the number one attorney. Then they had a list of all the other ones that they designated as top attorneys. So Henry Berman, the president, he passed away, and they had a memorial service for him.

I have to say this while I'm thinking about it too, is that years later, he came up to me and told me how much respect he had for me and so forth, and so we sort of mended things. So, I went to the memorial service and afterwards, I

noticed that Ray Connors and Jim Jefferson, the fire commissioner, and a lot of people had gathered around John Keker because of that article that just came out. You know, big celebrity now. I started to walk over to where they were and he saw me and he just walked over and he said, "Oh, chief." He met me halfway there and so the crowd that was around him kind of came with him. He says, "They had an alarm incident by my office." His office is over North Beach. Everywhere I looked there was Asian firefighters here, a different group of Asian firefighters here. In other words, he knew that I had made a real effort to hire a lot of Asian firefighters because like I said, the department should mirror the community. I guess he said even after the guy had blasted the Black Firefighters and all that. But the thing was that was an individual. I never try to let individuals influence how I look at a group. So he said yeah.

I forgot to tell you this. He had represented me and a couple of the executive board members. I don't know what his problem was, but he had accused me—and by that time I was an assistant chief. He had accused me of misappropriating some funds, Black Firefighters funds, which was crazy.

It was interesting, my father at that time, he was about ninety years old. He went into state court and all of that, and they told him, get out of here with that stuff. Eventually, he went to the police department somehow, and they jumped at the opportunity to try to say that I did something wrong. They had me on the six o'clock news, eleven o'clock news, just blasting me all over the news. Every news station, every station had me, showing my picture and accusing me of misappropriating the Black Firefighters fund. When I first heard it, it was interesting because when I first heard, before he went to the police, I heard when he was first trying to say that, I have misappropriated funds. I said, "As soon as my wife finds out about it she's going to be mad." Because a lot of times, I would meet different people and they were having a luncheon or something like that, and saying, "Bob, are the Black Firefighters going to come to our luncheon?" and we sent you something. So if I had money, I would reach and give them money, and sometimes, more times than not, I would forget to get my money back from the association. And on top of that, several times they had voted to give me an expense account and stuff, and I just let out, killed it, I said no. I was taking money out of my own pocket to do stuff, okay? I didn't have an expense account, I didn't have no salary, and so that's what I meant about my wife.

03-01:18:52

Farrell:

Yeah.

03-01:18:53

Demmons:

And I was calling around the country. Our phone bill would be high and stuff, and I paid that. The only thing the Black Firefighters paid for was when I went to conventions or stuff like that. Even when we went to Denver, they appropriated money for my airfare and I took that money and we used it. One

of the guys had a van, so I was able to take five or six other members in the van. We drove, which was a terrible trip, through Vegas. It was just crazy, ridiculous. And so John Keker contacted me and represented me pro bono.

Oh, and I was going to tell you, when that was on the news and all, so my father, he was about ninety years old at the time. He calls me and says, "What's this stuff about you and these funds and stuff?" I said, "Well Dad, you raised me." I said, "Do you think I would do something like that?" He says, "I know you didn't." Boy, that just really lifted my spirits because he always bragged about how honest I was, and my brother and sister were. So when he asked, I said everybody else will know about it too, as soon as it's over. I called the district attorney, I think it was Arlo Smith, I believe. I called him and I said, "Look, what I'd like for you to do is when this stuff is all over with, I'd like you to participate in a press conference." I said, "I know you don't know how it's going to turn out. Either way it turns out—if it turns out that I'm guilty, I want you to participate, and if it turns out I'm not guilty." He said, "Yeah, I'll do that, Bob," so I said okay.

So, John Keker assigned one of his kind of young attorneys. I dealt with a lot of attorneys, but he always had time for me and took time with me and stuff. In fact, he's a federal judge now, in the Washington, D.C., area, Boasberg, Jeb. It went on for a long time, so we were giving him documents and what it was, we had a legal fund that we was putting aside. We called it a legal investment fund. Part of the fund would go to me or any other member, if we needed to be off to the union, the presidents and all those, they all got off, period. Even when I first came in, the president and the rest of them never had to go to the firehouse, they never put on a uniform and they got their salaries and stuff. But then after we went on strike, they had to go to the firehouse, but the union would always pay somebody to work for them and stuff. It got to the point to where I couldn't get a lot of the Black Firefighters to do a lot of the work that needed to be done, so I had to do it. It was taxing to me, you know, and so they voted to do that.

Just to show you how things happen, I don't know how I found that document, but I went right to it, out of all the papers. Here was the minutes from one of the meetings where they voted to do that. This guy that was making these charges, it was a unanimous vote, was in that meeting. The police department, I guess they wanted to try to—well, this guy Audry Lee was at the meeting—I found out that he took some of our Black Firefighters documents to the police, and so the police department kept dragging their feet, and so the attorneys kept on them, saying look, we've given you all this stuff. The guy that had been the vice president, he was saying that the attorney, Jeb, said, "I'm looking at the money that the Black Firefighters were taking in." He says, "I was looking at the money that was going out." It gave a lot of money to a lot of other organization and stuff and he says, "There was more money going out than was coming in." He said, "Because Bob's been subsidizing this doggone organization, taking money out of his pocket, that's twice more going out than

coming in." So they were dragging their feet and so he finally put the pressure on them, they finally dropped the stuff and so we had a press conference then. The DA did send somebody on the steps of city hall and that was before I was in management services and stuff, so I cleared that up, but that was something I had to go through, you know.

Any time somebody makes a charge, there's certain people that are going to believe it, whether it's true or not. Like I said, I always prided myself in terms of the way I handle money. That was one of the reasons, I told you about one of the so-called gangs, where they wanted me to be the treasurer because they know I—their comments were, well we know we can trust you with the funds. I even thought there was one of the civilians, Vicki, back when we were going to have coffee, from headquarters, and so I wanted two newspapers. I stopped at the rack and I put a quarter in, took one out, closed it, and then put another quarter in. She says, "Bob, what are you doing?" I said, "Because it's not mine, that's somebody's quarter, it's not my quarter." That's just the way I feel about things. I don't want anybody taking anything from me, you're in trouble if you do that. Anyway, so that's one of the things that I went through, and the thing that sort of disappointed me was I didn't get members of the association that knew, coming out and saying nothing.

It was interesting, one of the black firefighters that we had got in because I think I mentioned to you about how Mayor Feinstein had to open up the list again, for us to get some more people. So one of the black firefighters got in through that, and he knew how he got in, and before all this stuff came out, I had asked—because he's the CPA—I had asked him if he would handle the Black Firefighters funds, and do all the things that we needed him to do. He wouldn't do it. But then I found out later that him and some of the other black firefighters, he got with them, trying to prove that I misappropriated funds. He had time to do that. So a lot of the things that happened, what I had to do, I had to look past the members of the Black Firefighters and say that I'm doing this for their kids. I said, "Now, if their kids can get a good education and get things that they need, they may be working in the human resource office or whatever, when one of my kids, something, going looking for a job. Hopefully, I won't have to worry about them not getting a job because of their race." I had to try to look at things like that.

I look at a lot of the things, not only that happened to me during that, because there was things that I had to do that had I not gone through it. At the time I didn't want to do it, but had I not gone through it, I never would have been chief. There was things that I learned in my life. I even look at some of the things I did as a kid, when I was telling you about the gang stuff, the leadership and stuff like that, [and] the Marine Corps. I look at a lot of things that happened at the time, maybe I didn't want them to happen, but I look at it [and] a lot of those things prepared me for what I had to do in the fire department, both before I was chief and when I was chief—particularly when I was chief.

It was interesting, I don't know if I told you when I went to management services? What happened was I was on the Battalion Chief's list—I had passed the battalion. I told you when I met with Postel and the rest of them were trying to get me to come in there. Like I said before, management services, everybody liked the twenty-four shifts, so that was kind of like a punishment, when you send an assistant chief down there in one of those headquarters positions. There was one of the chiefs they put down there. They said he was down there for two weeks and said the chief went in there and he was lying on the floor in his office, complaining that the stress was getting to him in there. When I got in there, it was easy for me, you know, because I had been doing a lot of that stuff before. Plus, dealing with attorneys and dealing with things. I didn't want to do it, but like I said, I look back on it and had I not done that, I probably wouldn't have been chief because there was a record that I established in administration, administrative things that I demonstrated in there that enabled Willie Brown to have confidence in me, that I could lead the department.

03-01:29:37

Farrell:

Before we get to that, with the consent decree, can you tell me a little bit about how that changed things for you, and if you thought that the consent decree was successful?

03-01:29:53

Demmons:

Well, it was interesting too, when we got down to negotiating for the consent decree, Shauna Marshall, one of the attorneys, and I, wrote most of the things. We were sort of given that assignment, to put the stuff together. Obviously, the other attorneys had input, but we were doing the first drafts and stuff. What I did and what really helped me a lot too was I was able, through the International Association of Black Professional Firefighters, I was able to communicate with people all over the country, so there were a lot of people that I met. That's when I said, I made a lot of phone calls. Plus, one of the things that happened that San Francisco, we apparently got a lot of national coverage in terms of that. I had people tell me they'd seen me on TV, locally and all over the country, or in the newspaper.

So, when we'd go to the conventions and stuff, obviously, people I'd interact with, and so I learned a lot of things looking at what happened to them and looking at what was successful, what failed them. So I sort of knew what had to be put together. It was interesting, we were scheduled to go to court, I believe that next week, and there was some type of a luncheon, some organization was having a luncheon at the Sheraton Palace. All the attorneys were going there, and so I was going there. Dan Siegel, who had taken over as the attorney representing the city, they wanted to see if we could come up with an agreement, so we didn't have to go to court that next week. After the luncheon, and everybody else left out, we all met together, all the attorneys, and so we were going over the different stuff. I wasn't satisfied with what was there because I knew. I had looked at a lot of things, how they can lock up—

they made an effort to lock up a lot of the upper positions with young people, and what really made me aware of that was that battalion chief I was telling you about, that was helping the people in my station. Well, he was upset because the system, when they gave the test for the assistant chiefs, all the young guys passed were at the top of the list. So he was complaining that he was so upset about it because he knew what was going on and he wouldn't even go down to the division to report to one of them young assistant chiefs. So that kind of let me know, made me look at what was going on. I saw the same thing happening with the other promotional examination, all of them young, and so I knew that they were doing that, and I knew we had to do some things to combat that.

When we were having that meeting, I just told them I wasn't going to sign on to that. After all those years, it was a very emotional meeting. I said, "I'm not going to sign up. I'm not going to do people like that and if they want to do themselves like that, that's fine. You guys can go around me and go through the Black Firefighters membership, but I'm not going to sign on to that." So, it was like I said, really emotional stuff. One of the attorneys even started crying during our discussion. I had put together some additional stuff we wanted anyway, so if you look at that consent decree and you'll see there in the back, where it talks about you can't do this or that. They added that, that was stuff that I had put together. They added that, made it part of the consent decree, so that's when I said, "Okay, I'll agree to sign." I had put together a schedule where you could take the lieutenants test and if you scored high enough, then the next year or so, you can take the captain, you know, where you can really move up the ranks. I'm looking at bringing women and minorities up into the upper ranks with that schedule, so they agreed to that and so we had that.

The first part, right after the consent decree, and then Postel became the chief, Postel was just doing what he had to do to survive. He was in some instances, it seems, like he was kind of straddling the fence. He would be on this—he would do stuff to try to appease, look like the other guys—you know? And Jim Jefferson and Art Agnos and the deputy mayor, Claude Everhart, because we campaigned for Art Agnos, and a lot of people attributed the Black Firefighters for him getting elected. The reason I was campaigning for him, because one of the firefighters had said that he had got a liver transplant or something, for his niece, when he was in Sacramento and stuff, and I looked and it really seemed like he did a lot of social things, it seemed like he really cared about people.

I'm jumping around, but I have to tell you this part. When he put his hat in the ring to run for mayor, I had met—Claude Everhart was his chief of staff when he was an assemblyman. So I had met Claude too, and so they had, the black community, had a forum where all the candidates for mayor were there and it was packed. It was on the TV too, on one of the cable channels or whatever, and Ray Taliaferro, I don't know if you know Ray, but he was moderating the thing. They had Art Agnos, Jack Molinari, and Louise Renne was running,

two or three other people, so there was about seven people who were running for mayor, and they were all there. I was just there. So, Ray had people lined up to come up and talk and there was a couple hundred people at least, from the black community were there. At that point, the Black Firefighters hadn't made up our minds, I was just there, you know.

03-01:37:47

Farrell: Mm-hmm.

03-01:37:48

Demmons: They had all of the people lined up to talk, on the side of the wall waiting to talk, and Ray said, "Okay, the last person, no more people, we've run out of time." I was sitting there and Louise Renne got up and she started talking about how she was for affirmative action, how she was this and that. I said, "I can't believe she's saying this," because we were in a bitter fight with the city, and her office, and our attorney, stuff was going on. And she's getting up and telling these people. I said, "I can't sit still," so I got up. Ray saw me. He didn't say anything, he let me stand there, and so when I got up there—

And prior to that, I had convinced the international to have a demonstration at the national headquarters of the IAFF, the firefighters union. So they did and they set up where they were going to have a demonstration at their headquarters nationally. They were going to encourage all the Black Firefighters chapters to have a demonstration in the front of their local headquarters. The International Black Firefighters voted to do that and so it was coming up in about a couple of weeks, or a week or two. So Louise, when she said that, I got up to the microphone and said, "You have enough—" because I was angry, you know, upset, and so I said, "You've got the nerve to come here and stand up here in front of all these people and say how you're for this." I said, "Every day, you're fighting our attorneys tooth and nail to maintain that fire department in its present condition, resisting everything we're doing to try to bring about representation of minorities and women, and you're fighting us every day." Obviously, she was hot, because some of the people started laughing, like Bob is really taking her to task. I went on and I said next week or whatever it is, I said, "The Black Firefighters, we're going to have a demonstration against that racist union, and I want to know which one of you people running for mayor will join us in that demonstration." This is when I realized how much weight we had in the city, not just in the black community but all over the city, because we had supported all kinds of people.

I think I told you, we were the first firefighters to march in the gay pride parade, in uniform. We had that, and we had support all over the city. I didn't realize it, even Richmond and Sunset, you know, Caucasians and all kinds of people that were for justice and for right, you know I had interacted with them and supported them in some of the things that they were doing.

So, Jack Molinari had gotten the union endorsement, the union had endorsed him for mayor. He said, "Bob, I'll join you guys in a demonstration against that racist union." Now he had already got the union's endorsement, and he said that, and that kind of brought me back. After that, we started talking about the Black Firefighters, who we were going to support, and we decided to support Art Agnos. When he got in the race, it was almost a foregone conclusion that Jack Molinari was going to be the next mayor because every organization, all the unions and everybody had supported him. All the black ministers and stuff, they had signed on to support him, and so Art Agnos was at 12 percent. What got me was when I was going around campaigning with him, with Claude Everhart. We went just about everywhere and people would recognize me or whatever and they'd say oh, I saw you before. One in particular that got me was when we went to this one house and they had a Jack Molinari sign in the window, and the women were doing hair, the place was full of women, evidently there was a beauty shop in the home. When she opened the door, the other women could see us and they said, "Oh, Bob." She said, "Oh, that's who the Black Firefighters are supporting?" I said yes. She went and got the Jack Molinari sign out of the window and said, "'My husband put this sign in there."

A couple of Black Firefighters, when they were campaigning in different parts of the city, they had on their t-shirts with the Black Firefighters, so people would recognize them. Claude Everhart said, "Bob, can you get all your members to wear Black Firefighters sweatshirts or t-shirts because the people are really responding?" A lot of black leaders were mad because like I said, most of them had signed on to Jack Molinari, and all the influence that he had, and it turned out that we had more influence than all these other groups put together. Art Agnos, as you know, won and he says it was because of the Black Firefighters that he won, that he became mayor.

It was interesting, the firefighter, C.J., the one that they Whited-Out in that newspaper? Mayor Feinstein left town to go somewhere and she had Jack Molinari as the acting mayor. During that time, they had arranged for Jack Molinari, they wanted to give him, the mayor gave him an award for heroism. I don't know if you know what he had done to get that hero thing, but there was a big fire in a warehouse or something out there in Bayview-Hunters Point. I think it was a fire, or whatever it was, and he was off-duty. He went in two or three times and each time to bring somebody out, off-duty. So the mayor was going to give him some kind of award, especially after he had been Whited-Out in that union newspaper. So, I got a call, and they wanted Jack Molinari to give him the award, again, playing their black—so I called him. I said, "Well, C.J.," and I didn't want to influence him one way or the other. I wanted him to make that decision and I didn't want him to know how I felt about it. So when I told him, I said, "They want to give you an award." I said, "The mayor is out of town and so Jack Molinari is the acting mayor now and he wants to give it." He said, "No, I want the real mayor to give it to me." I said, "Thank you."

So he refused to take it until Mayor Feinstein got back and presented it to him, so there was a lot of stuff going on. Like I said, it was things like that, that made me feel that I would never be chief because a lot of the politicians and people with influence, and even a lot of black leaders too, resented the stuff that I was doing. As you know, in particular, a lot of the ministers in the churches, because they get a lot of stuff from the city and then they get a lot of stuff from politicians' friends, who have millionaires and stuff that will donate stuff to these churches and give them different things, and the setup of these nonprofit things, a lot of these churches, well they're dependent on that. At first, I was upset and I didn't understand, until I understood that they can't sacrifice the programs because a lot of the programs they have are really beneficial to a lot of people.

One of the things that I learned, because I had to go around to a lot of the community organizations, and I would obviously listen to some of the problems and things they had—it was really tough, but it really enlightened me and made me more sensitive and aware of what people were faced with. I'll give you an example. I went to this one meeting and this lady lived in public housing, the projects, and she was complaining that she was trying to get help from this organization, to help her get the Housing Authority to replace her refrigerator. She said, "Because I can't put the food in the refrigerator part because it's too warm, and then I can't put it in the freezer part because my lettuce and stuff, it's too cold for my lettuce and stuff." She was almost in tears. She says, "I can't keep buying lettuce every day." I'm thinking in the firehouse how many times I seen us finish and just throw half of the salad away and here she is, she was almost in tears, and I'm thinking what in the world is going on. That's just an example. I used to hear all kind of stuff, so that made me want to do what I could and get our association to do what we could to help people. That's why we were doing it. I didn't realize that we were building a lot of support by doing that, we were just doing it trying to help, a lot of things, trying to help people. But as it turned out, we supported them in a lot of ways. That was an experience.

Like I said, eventually we started getting a lot of media coverage as things went on. It was interesting, the same guy I was talking about, because we were complaining before how we couldn't get the media to cover our stuff. Jimmy Dunson, the one I told you that passed away—I think it was in January or something, that one year—he counted—I think it was the *Examiner*. It may have been the *Chronicle*, but I think I'm pretty sure it was the *Examiner*. We had twenty-one straight days, straight days, where they covered fire department issues and you know the reporters were wearing me out. Every time I looked around, they wanted an interview. So, one day we were in the office and there's some reporters. I said, "I'm sick of those reporters." He said, "What is wrong with you?" He said, "What is wrong with you, don't you remember how we—?" He used to tease me about that afterwards too. But it took a lot of effort from a lot of people. A lot of people sacrificed and it wasn't always people in power. Sometimes it was just people off the street.

I always think about, I think I mentioned to you that that poster there, the guy that I got that from. Our office was on Third Street, way up in Bayview-Hunters Point, and one day I was sitting in the office and this Latino guy came in and he had that poster rolled up. He introduced himself and unfortunately, I was just so taken aback, I can't remember his name. I thought he was selling it and I said, "Oh, that's a nice poster. How much is it?" He said, "No, no." He said, "I walked over from the mission to bring this to you." He said, "I heard you speak the other day and I wanted to give you this." He turned around and he left out and I was speechless. To this day, I just hate the fact that I don't know his name or nothing. I got it framed and that's what I had in my office when I was in management services and when I was the chief. That's where I got that poster from.

03-01:52:10

Farrell:

Did it take you a long time, or what was the process like in developing a public persona? So, you're talking to the media, you're talking to the administration, you're dealing with the Black Firefighters Association, and all the other coalitions, of learning how to be diplomatic in your speech.

03-01:52:37

Demmons:

I don't know if I'm diplomatic. [both laugh] Some of the people I talk with wouldn't say I was too diplomatic.

03-01:52:44

Farrell:

I've heard people say that, that you're really fair, and that you speak really well. I guess maybe not diplomatic, but respectful.

03-01:53:01

Demmons:

Well, I care about people.

03-01:52:03

Farrell:

Yeah, if you could talk a little bit about how you kind of developed the public persona of speaking with people in different parts of the department.

03-01:53:11

Demmons:

I don't know. I guess like I said, it goes back a long ways in my life, how I look at people. I guess because of the environment in my home, not so much outside the home, is that I just respect individuals and I demand people to respect me. I genuinely like people I guess, even though I consider myself more of a loner than anything. A lot of people don't agree to that because of what I do. But I do.

When I was growing up, when people would do stuff to me, I would always try to—I would think now, are they doing that to be mean, or are they just doing that, you know. And once I was convinced that they were doing it to be mean, then unfortunately, in those days the fight was on. But I don't know, we are all here on this earth. First of all, I believe in God. Now, some people don't, that's their business. But I do because I personally have experienced things in my life that I know aren't humanly possible, so there's only one

other alternative. And I've seen things. I recall, plenty of times on a Friday, faced with something that was going to take place that next week, really just wracking my brain trying to figure out how to deal with it. It was some big issues, you know? And that Monday morning, all of a sudden something would come clear out of the blue to resolve it. Where did that come from? That was like a lot of things. So I just look at people, life is tough anyway, you know. We're all just trying to get from A to Z and I always felt that if you can't do something to help someone, you don't have a right to do anything to them because everybody is trying to get through this thing we call life. I just don't feel like I, or anybody else, has a right to mistreat anybody because I sure don't want anybody to mistreat me. I don't want to see anybody mistreated and if I can do something to help somebody that's being mistreated, I'm going to do it. I don't know, I just feel like that's an obligation that I have to do as a fellow human being.

Like I told you, I had to tell the Black Firefighters, some of them, when they were saying things against women coming in the department, I said, "Well, I'm your president and I'm going to represent you to the best of my ability, but I'm going to always be on the side of the victim. So if you do something to any of these women, I'm going to be with them against you." So that's just the way it really is. Like I said, I had to discipline a couple of Black Firefighters that had been on report because they mistreated the white firefighters, and a couple of them hate to even try to speak to me now. They do it if they see me but you know, you don't mistreat people, you know? And it just, I don't understand how you do that, how do you get it in your mind?

And I told you before, how one of the guys I grew up, the older guys, turned out to be—well, they called him the King of Fillmore. He was the biggest hustler around and that's why I couldn't do that because to be a hustler, you have to take advantage of people, and that's not something I can live with. So I don't know, I just treat people like I want to be treated. I like people. I don't know what else to tell you.

I think about, I told you how I was a watchman at the veterans building. Well, they had a guy and he was born in Ireland, and he was an elevator operator, Jim Cronin, and a lot of times, because I could go anywhere, I was watching him. He was stuck on the elevator, so a lot of time I would spend time just talking to him in the elevator, and he would tell me stuff about Ireland, and even tried to teach me a few words in Gaelic. What happened was, all the janitors—except for the foreman, he was Hispanic—were African Americans, and one of them was supposed to give him a break on the elevator, let him go take a break, and they weren't doing it. They were taking advantage of him because they felt that he was too intimidated to say anything. When I found out about it, I dealt with it. He was getting his breaks and stuff. He was a victim. How are you going to treat somebody, how you going to do somebody like that? So it don't matter what race or whatever it is, or what gender, none of that stuff matters. We're all human beings.

03-02:00:00

Farrell: Well I think that's probably a good place to leave it for today, and then next time we'll get into your time as chief.

03-02:00:06

Demmons: Okay.

03-02:00:07

Farrell: Thank you.

Interview 4: August 3, 2016

04-00:00:08

Farrell:

Okay, this is Shanna Farrell back with Robert Demmons on Wednesday, August 3, 2016 in Oakland, California. This is our fourth interview for the California Firefighters, San Francisco Fire Department oral history project. Robert, I was wondering if you could tell me a little bit about before you became chief. You were assistant chief, and I was wondering if you could tell me about your process of becoming chief, becoming assistant chief—especially because last time you had mentioned that you thought that you never would become chief because of everything that was going on in the department. So, this was sort of a stepping stone. I was wondering if you could tell me a little bit about moving into that role?

04-00:01:00

Demmons:

What I was referring to were the two appointed positions; deputy chief and chief of department, which were appointed and have some, obviously, political components involved in that. Those are the two positions I felt that I would never achieve. Assistant chief is through examination process and that's one of the reasons I fought hard. Also, to try to make sure the examinations were valid and the security of the exams were maintained. So I felt that I could make assistant chief but not go any higher than that. I was on the battalion chiefs list and I was still a captain and I had stepped down as president of the Black Firefighters Association. I was looking forward to going out to the smallest and one of the slowest battalions in the department, sort of semi-retiring is what I had in mind.

They were having a lot of problems in the Division of Management Services. There were a lot of complaints and a lot of things going on in terms of that the chief there wasn't really performing and getting complaints from the attorneys, from all over the place. It's an assistant chief position and none of the assistant chiefs really wanted to go in there because you're dealing with attorneys and consent decree; that's one of the major things that they were dealing with in that division at the time. So, Chief Postel came to me and asked me if I would go into the division and I said, "No way." One of the problems was that in order to—years ago, the 798 [union] got a ballot or some proposition that said that you can't pay a person higher, more than the next highest civil service rank, and it was told to me that was done because they were afraid that they were going to promote Earl Gage up to chief officers' rank. And so, being that I was still a captain, I hadn't made battalion chief yet, I was on the list but they hadn't reached me yet. That meant that I would not be paid, they couldn't pay me assistant chief rank salary. I had already taken a position that people, when they do a job, they should be compensated for it. I knew that years before that, when Earl Gage was in Management Services, they would bring an assistant chief to that division and put him over. Earl was doing all of the work, and the assistant chiefs, they'd be walking down the hall drinking coffee and stuff. So I always felt that that wasn't something that we should do. In other words, if you do a job, you should get paid for that job.

The chief in there was Frank Scales and there a lot of complaints. He was just making ridiculous statements, offensive statements about women. For instance, one of the firefighters, she was pregnant, and she was on the review committee, and the complaint process called for the review committee to review complaints and make recommendations. He told one of the women that had filed a complaint, her attorney wanted to know what was taking so long, and he made some ridiculous statement like, "Well, you know she's pregnant. You being a woman, you know how that stuff is." Just totally inappropriate. So there was a lot of pressure on Postel to get him out of there. The ACs [assistant chiefs] didn't want to go in there. Every now and then something would happen. A week would go by and he'd say, "Bob, why don't you go down there?" One of the guys that was his friend and he didn't have a reputation of being able to handle a lot of stuff. I just told him, I said, "Why don't you put him in there?" He didn't respond because he knew I was being facetious. Finally, the court monitor got in on the act and said, "Well, one of the main things is that you helped draft a lot of that consent decree, and so you know what it is and stuff, you've been doing it." She even got to the point that she—I don't know why she did. She called my wife and tried to get her to pressure me. Jim Jefferson and Frank Quinn, they were two people on the fire commission, and Frank Quinn—I really miss him—he was just one of the people that really was committed to other people and really committed to seeing that people were treated right and got justice.

Finally, I figured out a way that I would go in there and be compensated. So what I did was, I told them that. We met over at Jim Jefferson's office. It was Chief Postel, Frank Quinn and myself, and I set out a set of conditions. I said, "Well, because if you were in the staff position, like the chiefs in the field, they can work overtime. But if you were on a forty-hour week, you can't work overtime." Anyways, what I did was I had said, "I know, with all of the problems and situations in there, that I'm not going to be able to just get away with working forty hours a week, so what I want you to do is to agree that I'll be paid overtime for all the hours I work over," and they agreed to that.

The other one was that Frank Scales was the only African American chief, but when he went down there, the exam unit, the assignment office, and some other things, was part of your responsibility to supervisor. Well, they took all of that from under him, so the only thing he was dealing with was the consent decree. They took all of the people, except people of color, and moved them out from under him and they brought in an African American, his main secretary, from fire prevention and took the white secretary out of there. So I told them, at that point, I said, "I want everything that was under management services before he took over and you took all that way, put it back there, because I think you were discriminating against him by removing all of those people from under his supervision." They agreed to that, and the thing that got me was when I said that, Postel didn't disagree with me. He didn't even respond, like no that wasn't the case Bob, or nothing, and so they agreed to do all of that. So I did, I agreed and I went in there.

The interesting thing about it was, this was like on a Thursday, and so I know before that during the weeks when he was messing up, I would ask Frank Scales how are things going, and he didn't have a clue that he was going to be removed out of there. "Oh, I'm doing a great job. I'm one of the best chiefs down here." I'm saying, "Okay." So on the way back, I was riding with Chief Postel. I said, "When do you want me to start?" He says, "Tomorrow." This was on a Thursday and I said, "What are you going to do with Frank?" He said, "I'm going to send him back, bust him back down to lieutenant." I said, "Well, that's not right. You've got some other chiefs in here that are not doing their doggone job and you're not demoting them." He was just dead set on it. He said, "I want you to start tomorrow. I'm going to go in there and bust him back."

I called Jim Jefferson and I told him, even though Frank Scales had done a lot of stuff to me. Like I said, I always had to try not to deal with people personally and so I told Jim Jefferson what Postel was going to do. I said, "I don't think that's right unless he's willing to demote and not promote some of the people that I've seen." Jim Jefferson agreed with me and so I guess he got with Postel, and they moved him to support services.

When I got in there, I immediately started looking at the different things that needed to be done. For instance, that's when I met Binnie Singh. She was one of the EEO people and the top EEO person was Vicki Macklin. Vicki Macklin did some things that, you know, and she was one too, who tried to take credit for stuff that Anne Young was doing later and stuff. And then some of the people that she was associated within the fire department. For instance, she was real close to Chief [Joseph] Medina later, who wasn't a chief then, he was the fire marshal at that time, and some other people—firefighters that I knew that weren't committed to things that they should be committed to.

So, when I went in and the person that really stepped up and really gave me a lot of support was Binnie Singh. I saw that she was extremely capable. She would come in on the weekends with me and we would do work and get stuff done. One of the things we did, for instance, the print shop. When I was out in the field, I would go to different fire stations. I'm telling you, I've worked in all the fire stations and the fire boat and the airport and all that, and I would go to different fire stations and I would have reports to fill out.

04-00:13:34

Farrell:

Pardon me. [sneezes] Excuse me, thank you.

04-00:13:36

Demmons:

Bless you. And I would look for different forms and I couldn't find them. The next morning, when the regular officer would relieve me and I would mention that I had ordered some more forms, he'd say, "Oh, Bob, we have some over here, under this." We wanted to set a real system where forms would go out and we wouldn't be wasting forms, and people would know where—I was

chairing that SOP committee and so I had already started the committee working on a standardized filing system where we had four-drawer filing cabinets and two drawers were all the same in all the firehouses. So, I already started working on that. One of the guys, Firefighter Crabtree, was one of the guys that worked in the print shop. He was real resistant to change and I felt that he didn't feel comfortable. They had this old type printing machine that had this ink and all of that stuff, and you probably know what I'm talking about.

04-00:15:02

Farrell: Like a letter press.

04-00:15:04

Demmons: Yeah. So, we wanted to replace that with a high-volume copy machine, so we went around and found one and got money out of the budget. We set up a filing system where all the forms were categorized, the whole system. I had two battalion chiefs working on that and they were met with a lot of resistance from Crabtree. He didn't feel comfortable with the change. I had to step in and do that, so we changed that whole system in terms of how forms were distributed, printed, and the whole deal.

The big thing was the EEO complaint process. What had happened was how that process was developed was that the Black Firefighters had taken the position that we weren't going to file any complaints internally because we had no confidence in the system, in the administration. So what happened was, the court monitor, Barbara Phillips, asked me, "What would it take for the Black Firefighters to feel comfortable using the internal system?" We were in the Black Firefighters office and we went over it, step-by-step. That's how the complaint process was developed. Keep in mind that during that time, there were no black chief officers out of the fifty-something officers and no Asians. I think maybe one or two Hispanics, and that was it. And obviously, no women. Period. None down in the ranks.

So, in looking at the process, I was trying to figure out how I could get women and minorities involved in the process. I came up with a review committee that would be made up of minorities and women, that would review. The other thing that I wanted to do was to have the chiefs be in charge of investigating and they didn't want to do that. They wanted to hand everything off to human resources, you know all of that, but I viewed that as part of their job. I also felt that if they had to investigate the complaints, that may be an incentive for them to make sure nothing happened under their watch so they wouldn't have to investigate. That was one of the things that I wanted to happen because I always believed that things are supposed to happen where they're supposed to happen. The chief officers, they're responsible for maintaining that environment, free from discrimination and stuff. I knew that that was something that they wouldn't want to do.

The other thing was that I didn't want any white males on the review committee. I knew that that would meet opposition, but the reason I didn't want that was because I knew that a lot of the minorities and women would be intimidated if a white male firefighter was involved in the process. They would look to them, to see which way they wanted to go, and I wanted the committee to be objective and things. So, that was really met with a lot of opposition too. I knew it would. So that was all agreed to, and so that's how the complaint process evolved. I felt that the review committee had to be in place until the upper ranks were integrated and more diverse. I didn't look at it as something that would last forever. I looked at it as a temporary thing, until people moved up into positions of authority. That was all agreed to, so that was one of the big things that we had, where it would be an assistant chief and a battalion chief would investigate complaints, and then it would be turned over to the review committee, and then I would make a recommendation to the chief.

One of the things that was real interesting, because nobody wanted to be the bad guy, one of the things that was interesting was at one point when I gave—and we have strict timelines. So, one of the things that happened, I had given Chief Medina my recommendation on a complaint and he was supposed to make the final decision. When I went down to the chief's office to inquire what's going on, I wanted to make sure the timeline was being met because that was part of my responsibility. He gave it to Chief Olson. We were in the outer office and Olson said, "I'm not taking it." So, Chief Medina tried to give it to me and I said, "That's not my responsibility, chief." I said, "I've done my part." I said, "The process calls for you to make a decision." He was really upset, but I gave it to him.

One of the other interesting things about the complaint process was someone had filed a complaint that also involved the deputy chief, Deputy Chief Olson. Deputy Chief Olson, people were pretty intimidated by him. He would intimidate people if he could—that was my observation. Jim Cavallini and one of the other chiefs, Harold Gamble, they were assigned to investigate. Also, Binnie Singh would be there to give them guidance if they had any questions about EEO and stuff like that. And Vicki also. Vicki Macklin would too, but I mostly relied on Binnie. What happened was during an investigation, and all of these things had to be taped, I was listening to the tape and I noticed how they weren't intimidated by Chief Olson when they interviewed him. They, you know, came across real objective, doing their job, and that really impressed me. I said, "Wow." Particularly, I've known Jim Cavallini and he had worked at Station 3. That station was where the confederate flag [was], but when he was a captain and stuff, and I was doing some stuff on the SOP committee. But I noticed that one thing about him was that he didn't want to be embarrassed by not doing his job. So, if you made it clear to him what his job was, he may not like it, he may not like you and all the rest of the stuff, but he's not going to be embarrassed by not doing his job, and he wasn't intimidated by the other guys that he hung around with. I noticed that about

him, but that really got me when I saw how they interviewed Chief Olson, and their recommendations, the investigation, how it went, and so forth.

If I can go off on a tangent, when I was appointed chief, I appointed Jim Cavallini to replace me as chief of management services. Now, a lot of the black firefighters, they were like, "What's wrong with Bob?" But my rationale for doing that was that I had noticed, not only in San Francisco, but all around the country, most of the time when you talked about people that were dealing with EEO, they always put a woman or a minority in doing that. White males aren't supposed to be involved in the EEO stuff and that was one of the reasons I did it. Plus, I knew that I had the final say on anything as chief, and I had faith that he would do a good job, and he did. I sent him to training down in San Diego and stuff, but he just did an outstanding job. In fact, he wrote a transgender policy and the rest of the city, EEO people, wanted to adopt it. That's how good of a job he did.

Also by that time, Therese Madden came aboard in the EEO unit too. Her and Binnie, they're alike too, and she was a real capable individual. That was one of the things, when I moved, I moved Binnie to the chief's office to work there. And later, [I] gave her the title of Human Resource Director. That was the thing in management services, we did a lot of things and changed the division. One of the things, Alan Wong was over there. I told you he was over the exam unit. He didn't want to report to me and so his boss, Ray Wong, I think, told the court monitor that, "Well, Bob may give the answers to the exams and stuff to the black firefighters." So, the court monitor, in one of her reports, said, "You never had any problem with 798 members being in that position and never questioned whether they were going to give answers to their members." Eventually, he came under my supervision and one of the things, one of my secretaries, Arletta Branchcomb, I had asked her to get something from him. This was at the beginning and he wouldn't give it to her. I went over, he was housed at another location. I went over there and I was pretty upset about it because there was still that resistance in terms. He was meeting with some of his people and he asked me if I wanted to meet later. I said, "No, I want to meet now." So we went in another room and I told him, "Don't ever resist cooperating with my secretary or anybody that I send to get something from you." I guess he was kind of shook up. He said, "Well, you don't have a problem?" I said, "I wouldn't have had her ask you for it if I had a problem with it." I said, "Don't play games with me and don't you ever do that again." He didn't, and we were able to work okay after that.

The big thing, when I was in management, when the administration changed—and that was real interesting in terms of, you know I was looking at the panel with the chiefs and every chief from Ed Phipps on. That includes me, the Black Firefighters had a role, either directly or indirectly, in them being appointed chief. It goes back to Phipps. At that time, Mayor Feinstein selected—it hadn't been official, but had selected Charles Cresci to be the chief. He was celebrating, smoking cigars, and so the attorneys, Eva Paterson

and the other attorney, we knew that Cresci and I knew personally—had done some things that indicated that he wasn't in support of the consent decree at all, and he did some stuff with the black firefighters, there had been some incidents. In fact, the coalition was going to have a demonstration against Mayor Feinstein, to try to persuade her not to put him in that position. We had scheduled a press conference and a demonstration and we had just about every civil rights organization in the city that was going to participate with us.

So, Mayor Feinstein started that morning, she called, or her office called. She didn't call directly, but Eva wanted to know if we could negotiate a talk. The group decided that Eva, Ed Lee, and I would be the three people on point in dealing with the whole demonstration and everything. So that day, the first one she wanted to was the African American deputy mayor that she wanted us to deal with. I said no because I had seen something that he had done before that didn't give me a lot of confidence. Plus, I wanted to make sure that it would be that we were getting this straight from her, in other words. And so we were negotiating back and forth that day. The three of us would be on the phone and they were communicating manly with Eva Then Eva would call me and Ed Lee and ask, "What do you think about this and that?"

Finally, because I was saying we wanted her to negotiate period, finally she said, "Well, what about Hadley Roff?" At that point, any dealings I had had with him had been positive, so I said okay. He's right next to her, so fine, we agreed. Late that afternoon, Hadley told us that she was not going to go through with appointing Cresci and wanted to know how we felt about Ed Phipps. Well, I drove Ed Phipps as an operator. I never had any complaints from any of my members about Ed Phipps. As it turned out later on, the problem with Chief Phipps was he wouldn't hold people accountable, and that's what got me more than anything else. These guys talked about how much they loved Ed Phipps, but they were doing all this stuff during his administration that got him in trouble because like I said, you couldn't meet a nicer person. I know because I drove him for a while, and I never had one member of the Black Firefighters ever say that he personally did anything. I don't think he would, but again, as chief, he was responsible for not only his actions; he was responsible for his subordinates, and that's where his failure was. He was just so nice, he wouldn't even do anything. In fact, there had been one point to where this captain in Bayview-Hunters Point had made derogatory statements about blacks, and the community and the Black Firefighters, we picketed the fire station because we wanted Chief Phipps to move him out of that neighborhood. And he wouldn't do it. Then, we had some community leaders, we met at the firehouse with Chief Phipps, and he still wouldn't move this individual. That's what I'm saying, he refused to hold his subordinates accountable.

I went off on a tangent and I'm going to get back on track [about] what I was talking about. Anyway, the other one, so that's how he got to be chief. Then, the next one obviously was Postel. The way Postel got to be chief, Mayor Art

Agnos had been asking the Black Firefighters for a recommendation. We gave him one name and he had some people saying no. He kept asking me to give him some recommendations from the Black Firefighters. We wouldn't give him any other recommendation other than the one, Carl Holmes. The court monitor, Barbara Phillips, evidently went to him, I didn't know it at the time, and recommended that he put Postel in there as chief because when he was over training, whatever, she would tell him to do, ask him to do, he would do it. I understood too, that you have a civilian coming in as a court monitor, dealing with the fire department, a paramilitary organization. She needed to have somebody in the chief officer's rank and stuff, that she could kind of rely on, that would do things she wanted. I understood that later on but like I said, that's how Postel got the job, which like I said, that's indirectly through the Black Firefighters.

Then, Chief Medina, Chief Olson had so much negative stuff that they knew that they can put him in there. Plus, Judge Patel had said that she was going to hold all the officers and chief officers accountable, and that there would be a fine, and she may even consider locking them up and doing that. But, like I said, Chief Olson had so much stuff, that the attorneys and I felt like he couldn't be there. So the Fire Commission, they were trying to figure out how to deal with it, and they were going through, like they were interviewing people for the chief job. They called me down, but I knew that was just, you know, they never were going to appoint me chief, and some other people. When we were talking, they were talking about the chief, and I don't know how it came up, I said, "In reality, the deputy chiefs are the ones that really are supposed to be running the department, the operational part, which is the largest part." They kind of thought about it. They reacted, and so the next thing I know, that instead of picking Olson, because they really was trying to get him in there, and my opinion of how things were—and I heard later on, that they didn't have confidence that Chief Medina could handle the department. So, they put Medina in there and put Olson as deputy, and everybody knew that Olson really was essentially running the department. So that's how he got in there.

Then, I don't have to tell you how I got there, being chief, because of the Black Firefighters, directly and indirectly. One of the things that happened was over the years, I'd run into Mayor [Willie] Brown every now and then. I never really had what you would call a relationship with him. We had a convention and he was our luncheon speaker once. And then, when I wasn't the regional director—it was the meeting in San Diego where I was elected regional director, and I hadn't even planned on running, but the person that was the regional director at the time, he was running for reelection, had told me that when I talked about trying to solve problems the southwest region had, consisted of seven states, and those chapters were having problems. So I was talking about, you know, helping. He said, "Look Bob, I'm not interested in solving the problems. The only thing I want to do is make a few connections to help him sell real estate, and when I'm going to meetings out

here, I hear all these things that were happening to people." Here he was, responsible for assisting, he took that attitude.

So, what had happened was, I suggested that Willie Brown be our keynote speaker at our regional conference in San Diego. He was in the assembly at the time. He agreed and then he wouldn't let us pay anything for him and nothing. I think there probably was some political stuff going on too, down that way too at the time. But nonetheless, he agreed and he came down. So, I was trying to talk some of the other people I knew into running against this individual and none of them wanted to do it. One in particular, Hershel Clady, he was the president of the Stentorians At that time, the city and L.A. County were all one chapter and he was the president. He had sued his department, took them all the way to the Supreme Court, to have other people get promoted and stuff. He had all kinds of other programs going in the area down in L.A. He had recruited women and minorities all over that whole area on his own, not only for his department, but for Pasadena. So, I tried to talk him into running, but he wouldn't do it. He said, 'Bob, I have my hands full.' I had my hands full in San Francisco too, but I felt that something had to be done; this guy couldn't be reelected, not with that attitude.

So, I couldn't get anybody else to run, so I said, "Well, I guess I'll run." At recess, during the nomination period, I tried to get someone and I couldn't; that's when I let some of the people in San Francisco and some others [know] that I'm going to run, right in the middle of the nomination. I hadn't done anything. So, when we reconvened, somebody nominated me and so I was running. When the vote came down, the president of the Santa Clara Black Firefighters, he came and he says, "Well John asked me to nominate him, Bob, but I didn't tell him we would vote for him." I said, "I don't know about that." Anyway, he did and then he voted for me, and so I won. It's a two-year term and so I was there for two terms, but it was really stressful for me because I was dealing with San Francisco obviously.

04-00:42:38

Farrell:

Mm-hmm.

04-00:42:39

Demmons:

But again, as I told you before, a lot of the things that happened prepared me for different things later on. For instance, I learned that—I would go to dealing with the presidents, and I would go to different meetings and I would still hear about the problems from the members in that particular chapter, and so that's when I realized that it's how you—it's like a battalion. Once you make battalion chief—when you're a lieutenant or captain, you deal with your people directly, but when you become a battalion chief and on up, you have to deal with the people indirectly. You have to learn how to get things done through those company officers and you have to have a certain amount of knowledge of what's going on and making sure that they're doing what they're supposed to and they're carrying out your orders and your procedures

and enforcing them. I sort of equate it to using an analogy like flying a kite. If you're flying a kite, you can maneuver the kite around. But if you put a person in-between you and the kite, you can't maneuver the kite around. You have to make sure that this person is doing what you want him to do. So I learned that was one of the things that really helped me when I became a chief officer.

04-00:44:30

Farrell:

Can you tell me a little bit about—so you were appointed during Mayor Brown's inauguration speech. Can you tell me a little bit about that moment, and then the inauguration ceremony?

04-00:44:44

Demmons:

Well, I have to tell you leading up to that, what happened. Okay, about a year before, at the beginning of the other year, I started thinking about—. Well, I have to go back because at one point I had thought about leaving the fire department because as president of the Black Firefighters, I had to deal with chiefs and stuff in a manner in which you normally wouldn't have to deal with. I saw some of the chiefs and I realized what had happened was, they were still thinking like firefighters, but they were chief officers. They had moved up the ranks, but they still—in other words, the different skills, technical skills, human skills, diagnostics and conceptual skills, they were still dealing from a technical skill perspective. As you go up the ranks, you use less technical skills and more diagnostic and conceptual. When you get up in those chief positions, you're supposed to be really using diagnostic and conceptual skills. So I saw that's what was happening and I was really discouraged. My mentor Carl Holmes, Chief Holmes, I would talk to him. We would talk almost every day. He was traveling around doing seminars. I said, "You know, Carl, I don't know if I really want to stay in this department because when I look at some of the people that have obtained the chief officer's rank, it's really not—wouldn't give me a feeling that I've achieved anything if I did that." At that time he would call me "Dad" a lot and, "Oh Dad, some of those people are showing you all the wrong ways to run one of these organizations." He said, "So all you need to do is make note of saying, if I get to be chief, I know I'm not going to do that." And so he kind of encouraged me to stay in there.

Then I reached the point, like I said a year before I was appointed chief, and I had said that all these years, I said I spent a lot of time, me and a lot of other people, attorneys, civilians, trying to get different chiefs to do the things that need to be done. I just said to myself, well the heck with it. I've been trying to get chiefs to do that. I'm going to go and get that chief's job and I'm going to do the things that need to be done, that I've been hearing people say that they want out of this department. So I really convinced myself that that's what I was going to do. At the time, Willie Brown hadn't announced that he was running for mayor, so I didn't know who the mayor was going to be, but I knew. I had my mind set.

So the first thing I did was, I noticed that the Chief Officers Association, which is the fifty-something chiefs, they were always like back in the background, allowing the union to take the lead. I went to the meeting and at that time—I was telling you about the meeting with the CD, finding out what the community felt about the consent decree. So I went to a meeting and I said, “Look, we’re supposed to be the leaders in this department.” Some guy said, “798 is speaking for us.” I said, “Well they’re not supposed to be speaking for us.” I said, “We’re supposed to be the leaders and we need to take a position on the consent decree, whether we’re for it or we’re against it.” I said, “798, it’s clear that they’re against it, but I said we’re trying to move forward in this department and as leaders, we need to go on the record.” So with that, the guy that was the president, after that, I kept up the pressure and I submitted things. He stepped down and this was like in September, October, somewhere in there. His term was due to terminate at the end of December, but he stepped down, which created a vacancy, obviously a vacancy. He was the guy that was in management services earlier, before Frank Scales was in there, that was only in there two weeks. But he was also a referee for the college football and he was trying to be a referee in the NFL [National Football League]. So he didn’t want anything negative in terms of race coming out with him, and so I knew that he was trying to be that, particularly with being in a high profile position like that. He felt, I’m sure that he would get opposition even from the college that people got out and felt that he was involved in it because it was all over at that time, what was going on in the fire department. So he stepped down and I said, “Well I’m going to run.”

So I put together a position paper, submitted it, and—[laughs]. The only reason I’m laughing [is] because I went to one of the chiefs and some of the Black Firefighters felt that he may have been involved in one of those racist organizations. But I knew that even when he was a captain, all the other chiefs, how they interacted with him, you know—they never acted like he was a subordinate. I know that him and Chief Postel were real close and he brought him to headquarters. And I know that he had a lot of family in the department and his brother went through the fire academy with me. During that time in the fire academy, he wouldn’t even look at any of the blacks in there, let alone speak to them.

Just a side note. When he was on my SOP committee, you would have thought that he and I were best friends in there. I was really proud of the guys that were on that committee. They really wanted to do something and improve the department. Plus, what that did too was that laid some of the groundwork in terms of my resume, when I wanted to be chief, that I had moved that committee forward and we had done a lot. There was over thirty people on that committee. I went to him, the chief, and I said, “Look, I’m running for president. How about nominating me?” He looked [at me] and said, “Well Bob, why don’t you have {Ozell?}, one of those guys—some of the black chiefs—nominate you? I’ll second it.” I said, “Okay, you’ll second it, that’s good, thanks a lot, second it.” So, when the nomination opened up and the

other guys dropped down, so all the positions open up. They nominated this one chief that wasn't there and there was about twenty-something there. Every other position, it was two or three people nominated, so no one in that room was nominated for president other than me and this one guy that wasn't there. One of the black chiefs, I told him to get on the committee, the election committee, and I started getting word that the guy that they had nominated said he declined. So that left just me running unopposed. I saw this chief who would second the thing and I said, 'What's going on? I hear that Tom declined.' He said, 'Yeah, yeah, Bob.' He says, 'That means we're going to have to open it up again.' I said, 'No, that's BS.' I said, 'That's not what the bylaws said.' I said, 'I'm the president.' He looked like he was real shook up, again, and I heard and saw that one of the ones that was really pushing for them to make sure that I didn't get to be president was Jim Olson. This went on, so they said we've got to open.

Finally, they came up with saying, "We're too soon; the election is not until December." I said, "No." I said, "The vacancy occurred when Richardson stepped down and when them other guys stepped down." They were trying to set stuff up and by that time. I had really looked at suing the Chiefs Association and also the stuff that Chief Medina and them had been doing to me. It was well documented. The court monitor even documented a lot of that stuff in her reports. I went to Bill McNeill and told him that I wanted to sue the department and the Chiefs Association. He put the thing together for me and it was all ready for me to file; all I had to do was file it. At that point, obviously, Willie Brown had been elected because this was after November. I thought and I said, "Well, it would be hard for him to appoint me chief if I'm suing all my subordinates." I said, "If I don't get appointed, I still can file this and no hurt, so I'll sit on that."

So what I did was, I put together what I was going to do the first ninety days. One of them, like I said, I was going to appoint Jim Cavallini, and I put down why I was going to put them in there. Condon, who had real skills in terms of operations, I was going to put him in there and you know, right on down the line, and let him know. Chris Stevenson, I was going to make him the fire marshal because while we was trying to bring diversity to the suppression areas, they had stacked and done things in fire prevention to where before they had about a dozen blacks in there, but they were only temporary because they hadn't had—and they had gotten rid of all of them after the exam. I wanted to put an African American over them and maybe he can start to straighten up things. I laid all of that out and also, I had my resume, things that I had done in management service and stuff. Also, I had looked at problems that the department had been plagued with from every perspective, from the union, everybody's perspective. I put all of that down, that I identified, and possible solutions, and I gave that to him. He called me in for an interview and what was interesting, before that, mayors always took several months before they appointed a chief, they appointed a new one. He called me in for an interview and Fred Lau was there too and so he went in first.

When I went in for the interview, I had already submitted, like I said, all of this documentation. I went to sit down in the seat and before I was fully in the seat he says, "Demmons, why should I appoint you chief?" You know, like he was angry or something. I said, "Mr. Mayor, you have fifty-six departments that you're responsible for in this city. There's one department you won't have to worry about, so you'll only have fifty-five to worry about, because if you appoint me chief, I'll handle the fire department. I'll see that as my job. I really and truly don't know anyone in this country that's better qualified to head this department, with the issues and things that they're facing, other than me. That's why." He started talking and interviewing me, and I starting going, "You know, I sent you a document on this, and so you have all of that." He said—and this was before Christmas—he said, "Okay, you'll hear something by the end of the week." This was like on a Tuesday or something.

My daughter, you would have to know my daughter—she gets things done—she said, "Did you hear anything yet?" I said no. By Friday she said, "He hasn't called you yet? What's his number, Dad?" I said, "Tiffany, you better stay out of this." She would have called him. I mean, that's my daughter. You have to know my daughter. I said, "You'd better stay out of this." So I didn't hear anything, you know, but the only thing was, I was running—you know, he had a vetting panel of fifty-something people, I heard that was the number, that were vetting all the people for the positions, the department heads and all of that. A couple of the people that I knew, that was involved in that, they were saying, "Bob, your name is the only one that the people are talking about." and I said, "Yeah, yeah." So, Rose Pak—you're familiar with her—there was an article in the newspaper and she said, "I understand that Assistant Chief Bob Demmons is going to lose the assistant part of his title."

Oh, I have to share this with you. Amelia—she's the publisher of the *Sun Reporter* newspaper, I don't know if I mentioned this before. Anyway, when I had made up my mind I wanted to run for chief, I called her and I said, "Amelia, I have somebody that's interested in being the next chief of the department. I wonder if I can get you to support him." She said, "Who?" Kind of like, who is Bob going to come up with, you know? She was like she didn't want to fully commit, and she said, "Who are you talking about?" I said, "Some guy named Bob Demmons." She said, "Oh, I'm going to put that in the paper." So she put it in the *Sun Reporter*, and my picture and said I was seeking to be the chief. We all know that Chief Medina wanted to stay on.

I went into a staff meeting and Frank Scales, the one I was telling you about, he had brought the *Sun Reporter* in there. I was the last one to go into the staff meeting, other than Chief Medina. They were all sitting around the table and my boss, who was the deputy chief of administration, had the article in the newspaper in front of him. When I walked in, obviously, they had been talking about it. I walked in and he said, "Oh, Bob, I see you want to be chief." I said, "Yeah, somebody has to run this damn department." They were getting a big laugh out of that I guess. I didn't hear anything, so when Rose

Pak called me that morning and she said, "Are you going to the inauguration?" I said, "Yeah," and she said, "I told Fred not to wear his uniform." I said, "Okay, that's a good idea," so I put on a suit. I went there and the crowd was so that I couldn't get through, so I went back to my office and I put on my uniform. It helped me get through the crowd. I saw Fred Lau and Rose Pak, they saw me and we all were sitting together, the three of us. So, I still hadn't heard anything from Mayor Brown, and when he was doing his speech, he announced that he was appointing Fred Lau as police chief. The crowd started cheering and so forth. He kept talking and he said, "Well we can't talk about public safety without talking about the fire department." He said, "I'm going to appoint Bob Demmons as fire chief," and people started screaming. I said, "Did I really hear that?" So that's how I found out.

It was funny because later on, he said that he didn't realize that the commission are the ones that are supposed to appoint the fire chief. [both laugh] But everybody knows the commission serves at the pleasure of the mayor, so we know, you know, everybody knows who appoints the fire chief. Then he put the commission in place. In fact, the first time I met Steve Nakajo, he came to my swearing in. That's how I got in there.

When I became chief, like I said, I had already put that ninety-day plan, I already knew what I wanted to do. But prior to that, what had happened was the judge essentially said the fire department was out of the control, and the real problem, the discrimination and stuff was a problem, but that was more of a symptom. The real problem was the lack of sound management practices. So, she had ordered the department to hire a management consultant, to put together a plan and help them, you know, become more capable of managing themselves. Well, the fire department hired a consultant and after paying him almost \$500,000, four-hundred and something thousand dollars, they had to fire him because he couldn't do it. Well, I knew that, and I knew it and I'd seen other consultants, and I knew if changes and things are going to be done, they have to be done by the people in that department, period. You can't have outsiders coming in doing it, if they're not going to do it. I knew that and part of my plan was to do a retreat and make all of these chiefs and staff do that. My position was one that I was—I saw my position as a catalyst, you know, really being able to make these things happen. I wouldn't really be a part of them, so, eventually, when I stepped away, it would keep things going. I didn't want it all to be about me, and that's what most of your fire departments were and San Francisco was no exception. It was all about the chief doing this and the chief doing that. So that's what I did.

My job, as I saw it, was to give direction and to hold people accountable, and to give them the resources and things, and the support that they needed to carry out their jobs. That's how I saw my position and I felt that over the years, how I was able—that all of the chiefs and officers that I had worked under, they all gave me credit for doing a good job. The reason I felt that I was able to do that [was] because I looked past them and I looked at the

citizens. That's who I work for, that's their department. They're the ones that pay my salary through their taxes and other stuff, and that's the ones that I'm obligated to. If they're going to pay me, then I have to do the job I'm getting paid for. I'm not going to cheat them. So, as long as those chiefs, as racist as some of them were, as long as they weren't practicing that in the workplace and stuff, and as long as they were doing things that supported our mission, I was going to do the best I could to support them. And they all knew that. That was my position and so what I wanted to do, which I did, was to get all the leaders to start doing their job.

One side note. When I was in management services, the officer in charge of the print shop was having a problem with one of the people he supervised, who was an African American that I knew. Also, he had been in Vietnam and he came down there because he had been going through some problems, psychological problems in the firehouse, and he felt he had to get out of there. One evening, his officer came to me and he sat across my desk and he started telling me about the problems he was having with this individual. I was listening, saying "He did that, I can't believe it." So we're going through it, and after he finished telling me all of this stuff, he sat back [gestures] and so I sat forward [gestures]. "How do you plan on dealing with it?" I thought I was going to have to give him CPR when I asked him that question because he thought he had dumped the problem on me. I explained to him, I said, "See, it works like this. That's your job, to supervise him and if I have to supervise him then I don't need you. In fact, if I do that, that's your job, I expect to get your money, your salary." And I went through all of this stuff with him and I told him, "You put together a plan on how you plan on correcting his behavior and stuff, and I'll critique it for you." So he did.

The next day he came in and he had this, and so we went over it. I said, "Well, this will work, this will not, I wouldn't do this." I went and critiqued it for him. And it was amazing, like about a week or so—two weeks at the longest—I saw him and he was walking down the hall with his shoulders squared. I said, "That's probably the first time he really experienced leading something." That's what I was saying. So that was my position because I knew a lot of the guys when I was appointed chief, I know a lot of them are going to say, "Okay, Bob, let me see you run this department." I knew that's what a lot of them wanted to do and so that's what I said. I saw myself as a catalyst. I knew what my job was. I was going to do my job, but I wasn't going to do their job. So we started moving and doing things. Another big challenge came with the 2000, and we took over all that.

04-01:12:25

Farrell:

Yeah. Because I do want to talk about that. Before we get there, to the 9-1-1 call center, is that what you're talking about?

04-01:12:31

Demmons:

Yes.

04-01:12:33

Farrell:

Can you tell me a little bit about your swearing-in ceremony? I know that there was a lot of orchestration involved in that, from Mayor Brown, but I'm wondering if you could tell me about that a little bit.

04-01:12:47

Demmons:

Okay. Well, what actually happened was Ray Connors, the fire commissioner's secretary, was supposed to put it together. I think it was just a week or two, two weeks at the most, he came and said he couldn't do it. So Binnie Singh stepped up, and Claude Everhart. I don't know what they were doing, but they're the ones that put everything together, which was amazing in the short timeframe they had to do it. They're the ones. All I knew was I was supposed to show up. The one thing that I just feel so blessed that happened was my mother and my father and my late sister were all alive to see that because all of these individuals knew me, obviously all my life, and I know that they never expected, like I never expected, that I would even be not only chief, I wouldn't even be a firefighter, you know. And my stepmother, they all lived to be—interesting, they all lived to be ninety-six years old, the three of them, except my sister, but my stepmother, my father and my mother. My father passed away first, and then my mother, and then my stepmother.

But I just feel so blessed, and the only one that—two people that weren't there, was my oldest son. He was in training back east, and I thought about it later, I said, "I should have flew him in over midnight and got him out there." And then the other one was my brother in-law, who was the one that really helped me get my life on track. He had passed away. That's the only two people. Oh and also my stepbrother, he had passed away, but at least my parents got to see me sworn in. Like I said, the thing about it was, what was great was I would look in the newspaper and there would be stuff about Mayor Brown and this department head, and I was really saying—

I remember, I told you I went to the Kennedy School, the government leadership course they had there, and they were talking about the dangers of doing things outside of the box. I remember sitting in there and saying, "I think my danger is if I'm doing stuff in the box, with my boss." So it was interesting, over the next several months he took me at my word, I guess, that I'd run the department because he never said anything to me. So I'm looking in the media and he's talking about this department and that department, and I'm saying, "What is going on?" So, it had been almost a year and the only thing, like I said, most of the time when I would see him, it would be something that I wanted to talk with him about.

One of the interesting things was the budget process. What I did was I was trying to implement a system where all the captains, of the station particularly, would be accountable for their budget. That would include their utilities so we could have something to eventually set standards in terms of what range because these are taxpayers dollars. That's the way I always looked at it. It's

not my money, it's not our money. Somebody has to pay for this stuff. I wanted the uniforms. Some of these guys, firefighters, are wearing their uniforms on their second job and they're putting in for more boots and stuff than they should. So I was trying to implement accountability all the way through the budget, work it all the way into the battalions, divisions, so that all of these people would be there. I know that they say you're supposed to ask for more money than you need. I don't know, I just like to be truthful about stuff, so I put together a budget the first year, in terms of exactly what I felt was needed to run the department. When I submitted it to the mayor's budget person and we went over it, I was left with the impression that I was going to get exactly what I asked for. The next thing I know, the mayor's office, his budget person, the mayor, had sent his budget to the finance committee and had taken \$3 million away from me. I said, "Hmm, they must think I inflated my budget or something but they led me to believe that I was going to get everything I asked for."

So now I'm in a position where I can't oppose my boss's budget, right? And so Leland Yee and Barbara Kaufman and Sue Bierman were on the finance committee and the two people on the board of supervisors that had demonstrated to me that they weren't supportive of me were Barbara Kaufman and Leland Yee. Sue Bierman was very supportive. They were the three people on the finance committee, so now it goes on and obviously, it went through the process and to the full board and all that. Now I have my money to run the department. So I get down several months and the comptroller, Ed Harrington, said the fire department is not going to have enough money to get through the fiscal year. So I went back, looked, I was going to be \$3 million short. Do you see what I'm saying?

04-01:20:00

Farrell: Mm-hmm.

04-01:20:04

Demmons: So then I had to go for a supplemental, okay? Now I'm standing up there and Leland Lee and Barbara, "Don't you know how much it costs to run your department, Chief?" Now this is on cable TV, so I can't say, "Yeah I know, but what happened is the mayor's budget person took it from me." I can't come out and say that. So I said, "Okay, now this is real budget process 1A," because then a lot of the other people get supplementals. Then the supervisor puts that money toward their pet projects, without having to go through the stuff in the initial process. That next year I said, "Okay, I know how this stuff works," but I still didn't want to go over. And the other thing was the stuff about overtime. We have mandatory staffing, and if you can't give an examination and you don't have a list to hire off of, you can't run these companies short, and so the only alternative is overtime. That's been there for years, but Phil Matier and some of the rest of them, they'd go after me and whatever. They have to fill up their column, I guess, and so that's the way it works. You can't close the firehouse down. So if you only have two people

and you need four people to staff an engine, what do you have to do, you have to hire overtime? That's been there. Unless you're hiring in groups. It's not like you can hire somebody today and put them to work, you know?

The other thing is, if you don't have an exam, if you're not getting the money that you need to hold the exam and if the exam is held up for anything, then you're going to have, the longer it's held up, the more vacancies you're going to have, which means more overtime. They don't look at the fact too, that as one point it was cheaper to hire overtime than to have the person in there because you've got to pay medical, all that other stuff. They don't look at that, you know, and the politicians, they're the ones that take the heat from the public so they have to jump on you. So I said, "Well, I understand how this works now." Every year I would go in and say, "Okay, you all beat up on me. Just give me my money so I can run my department." Then I would try to get money for exams and I couldn't get that, you know, timely like I wanted, so that's that.

04-01:22:58

Farrell: How did you negotiate that? Did you end up using the supplemental budget?

04-01:23:03

Demmons: Well, I just had to go before the Board of Supervisors and ask for additional funds.

04-01:23:09

Farrell: And they granted it to you eventually?

04-01:23:12

Demmons: Yeah, they give it to you, yeah. See, but the reason they become aware of it is because the comptroller is monitoring the total budget and seeing where we are in terms of our expenditures and projecting, where we're going to be if we keep spending at that same rate and so forth.

04-01:23:33

Farrell: Do you remember what kind of things were in your budget at that point?

04-01:23:37

Demmons: Everything.

04-01:23:38

Farrell: I'm sure salaries.

04-01:23:39

Demmons: Everything, everything. Everything from PG&E to uniforms, and the biggest thing is salaries. That's the biggest thing. Police and fire, 75 to 80 percent of the budget is for salaries. Those are the two largest things that you have in your city budget, is fire and police salaries.

04-01:24:12

Farrell:

You started to talk about the 9-1-1 call center and taking that over. Can you tell me a little bit about that initiative?

04-01:24:18

Demmons:

Yes. Well, everyone was concerned about computers crashing and stuff, you know. At the same time, we brought the paramedics over, which really put a real strain on us to get things done. What had happened was, when we were going through that process, the mayor had put his new budget person in charge of that as a project manager. He was just trying to get through it. The police, they were just supposed to go online first and then the fire department. Well, the police are pretty slick, I don't know if you know that by now. It seems like they're always ahead of the fire department. I don't know whether that's because of the guns they carry or something, that people give them a little extra support. I looked around and we were supposed to go online first. And that's when I started—what I did was every discretionary position that I had, I advertised it. Before, the chief would pick who they wanted and who they liked and I advertised it. People would submit their resumes and stuff, and then I would try to be objective. A lot of positions, I would have other people too, evaluating, screening them.

So, one of the people, I think that's when I put Joanne—I picked her to deal with the city person in terms of the 9-1-1 system. So we got it, or whatever, they gave a contract to the company. Martin, he was just trying to get on time and on budget. I was concerned about the system operating right and functioning right, and so it was really a nervous time. Joanne did an excellent job in terms of not committing to stuff, you know, and keeping me informed almost on a daily basis, in terms of what was going on and what the issues were, and she was very good at handling the political things that were going on with the system. So, after we came up with our plan to put the CAD system up, I said okay. I told her, I said, "Send it out to every member of this department and let them look at it and see what they think because you never know. As soon as we put something in place and we have a major problem, you'll see some firefighter out there that knows everything you want to know about it and say, 'I knew this was going to happen.' So don't worry about the rank or nothing else; give everybody a chance to look at it and evaluate it." So that's what we did and we got some suggestions back from a few people out there that knew something about computer systems. We took our time and there was a lot of pressure, like I said. The mayor's person was trying to hurry up and make sure, and so Joanne did a good job in not allowing them to rush us and stuff. So we did, we went online and everything went [snaps his fingers] like smooth as silk, you know, which gave me a big sigh of relief. After that, I put her in some other positions. I put her over training because she had shown me what she was capable of doing. So that's when I moved her. I had her in support services for a while too, but I think the big one was when I had her over training.

04-01:28:57

Farrell: Was that the Division of Training?

04-01:28:58

Demmons: Mm-hmm.

04-01:29:00

Farrell: I had read that that was one of the initiatives. Can you tell me a little bit about how you developed the Division of Training?

04-01:29:08

Demmons: Okay. One of the things was—I think I mentioned it before—that I know that the department, some of the chiefs before, they would put black firefighters down there that would say negative things about the black firefighters. There was one particular black fire lieutenant, I remember when he, early on in his career, where—Boulevards, that building, there was a fire in that building years ago and there was a picture in the paper where he was hanging out of the window, the second story window. The guys that were in the fire said that the fire was in another room, away from him, and say he got scared. They kept him down, they put him down to—he was one of the ones that made lieutenant off of that thing that they have. He was on the executive board, the Black Firefighters. He spent very little time in the field after he made lieutenant. They kept him down in Division of Training and he was the one at one point that had helped fire his cousin and stuff. At one point they moved him. I think when he made captain, they moved him to the assignment office and then back down, but the big thing was that there was no consistency in how they were training you in the Division of Training and how you actually did things in the field.

The other thing was that, as I mentioned before, I was heading that SOP committee and that's one of the things we were trying to develop, SOPs. What I thought that was going on, why there was resistance to doing that, was because if you have standard operating procedures, it makes it easier for people to prepare for a promotional exam. But if you're doing things one way at Station 7 and another way at Station 12, and then you pick somebody from Station 7 to help the consultant develop the exam, then guess who is going to do well on the exam? I think I mentioned it to you before, when I did that survey in terms of that. So, what I wanted to do was, as part of the SOPs, carrying on that role, I wanted to make it consistent. I wanted it to be not only consistent between what you learn and what you're teaching at the Division of Training, but also how we're actually doing the job in the field. The other thing that I wanted to do was to rotate the training officers and not pick people that wanted to influence. I wanted to rotate them so that when they would leave the Division of Training and go back to the field, then they would be consistent in terms of how they did things. That was one of the main things I wanted to do in terms of the division.

Also, I wanted to train the training officers on how to train and how to evaluate because there was no consistency there. You can be evaluated by one lieutenant, on say hose company, and get a perfect score, and another lieutenant may give you two or three deficiencies. So they just more or less put you there and said watch this lieutenant and this is how you learn how to evaluate, you know. I wanted to really bring more structure and organization.

[Interruption]

04-01:33:50

Demmons:

One thing that was interesting too, when I started rotating, this one black lieutenant was a captain—Armstrong. He didn't want to leave the Division of Training. Now, I speculated that he's afraid of fires. Well, I'm afraid of fires. Somebody said at one point, it was a chief, assistant chief or whatever, in the early '70s, when they was asking why there weren't more blacks in the department, who said, "Because they're afraid of fires." And some reporter asked me and I said, "Yeah, I'm afraid of fires. That's why I try to put them out as fast as I can." That's what I tried to do and anyways, what happened to Armstrong, he didn't want to leave training. He had been there for years. First he said that I had promoted Audry Lee even over him and that I was discriminated against him, retaliating against him because I accused him of firing his cousin and stuff like that. That wasn't the case. What had happened—because Audry Lee had done more stuff, between me and you, detrimental to me personally, against me, than he did, so I didn't deal with personal stuff. But what I did was I looked at both of their resumes, and he hadn't done anything outside of coming to work. Audry Lee had gone through state fire marshal classes. He had served on different department committees, he had done all kinds of stuff, it wasn't even close, but that's why I picked him, that's what I looked at. That's why I ask people to submit their resumes and stuff, where I had discretion. That's what happened. So then what he did was he went on disability. I don't remember what all it was, but Deputy Chief Harold Gamble was pretty much handling it. After we had the captains and the lieutenants at the Division of Training make more than the ones than you do in the field, as a captain or lieutenant, we had moved him out of training. After we moved him out of training, then he went on disability, after he had been moved to the field. So then he wanted to retire, but he wanted to retire as a captain of training. Well, he had already been sent to the field, back to the field, you know weeks or whatever, before he retired, so he couldn't retire. He was no longer the captain of training, he was the captain in suppression. So I asked Chief Gamble, I said, "Well, check with the city attorney and everything and see if there's any way that he can retire at that point. I'm not going to hurt anybody."

So, Chief Gamble says, "He asked to retire at this salary, at his training salary." I said okay. So anyway, he sued me and said I retaliated against him and all of that kind of stuff, and this went on even after I had retired. His suit went on and I had to go be deposed and stuff, but I hadn't done that to him

because like I said, I guess when they deposed Chief Gamble, he told them that the chief really tried to get it, see if there was some way to get him his Division of Training salary. But anyway, the big thing about the Division of Training, that's what I wanted to do down there. I wanted to change the focus that had come about when minorities came in, and some people said it changed from a division of training to a division of evaluation. I wanted to get it back, and I wanted to make sure that the officers down there knew that their job was to train the people, that the testing process—[phone rings]

04-01:39:32

Demmons:

Because the testing process, if it's a valid testing process, then these individuals are capable of doing the job, of being trained to do the job. That's not their job, to evaluate. In other words, to me, if I'm supposed to train somebody and they've already gone through a process, I look at it as a failure on my part if I didn't train them, when they were training. That's the way I view it. So that's what I wanted. I wanted to get back to what we had, and plus before, they would send people down there, guys would volunteer to go down there and try to prove that women couldn't do the job. So all that, I wanted to change all that type of thing.

One of the things that was interesting was I had projected, when we reached the goal of 10 percent women, I had projected out, and it was going to be like seven to eight years before we would get that, reach that, or longer, close to ten years. So I said, "The biggest problem is that women were held out all the years, couldn't get in, and it's only 5 percent," or whatever it was at the time. I said, "We need to get to 10 percent. Now they've all been evaluated, they're all capable of doing the job." I think I put, out of thirty people, we hire in groups of six because of the fifty-foot ladder, that's why. So I said, "I'm going to see how many women I can put in the class." I put fifteen women in one class, so half the people were women. Then I did sixteen or seventeen in another, trying to make up for the past exclusion. So I did three classes I think. Plus it was good because it gave them a lot of support. They could support one another when they were going through. There was a lot of positive stuff and what I really was proud of was that they all were making it through, okay? During that whole time I was chief, I only recall [that] I had to terminate one person, one woman, during all that time that I was making all these changes.

What happened was, I had an officer and I wanted to check with, make sure that she had received all the support and stuff that she should have gotten before I terminated her. So I checked with, in particular, one officer that I had a lot of confidence in, and I knew that he was a caring person and skilled. So I called him and he said, "Yeah, Chief." He says, "I've come early to help her." He had been on a truck for years. I said, "Would you want her on your truck?" He says, "No, I've worked with her before." And he says, "She's just not ready." So I terminated her. That's what I'm saying, all the people I had hired, that was the only one termination that I made. So those are some of the things I wanted to do at the Division of Training. Then the other thing was

obviously, by putting Joanne as Chief of Training, that said a lot to the women that were coming in too, so.

04-01:44:00

Farrell: How did the public react to the increased number of women coming into the department?

04-01:44:08

Demmons: By that time, I just received positive stuff because you remember some of the women that had come in, and if you look at that thing, you'll see some of the people on the panel and people in the audience, and they were speaking to the consent decree and women, and stuff like that. I always got positive feedback. By that time people knew me, and that was the other thing. When people found out I was trying to be chief, I got a lot of letters of recommendation too, that was sent to Mayor Brown before he appointed me, from all over, different groups and stuff.

One of the things that I think about, where I still get blown away thinking about it, was when me and these other two Black Firefighters marched in the Gay Pride Parade, in uniform. We just had our Black Firefighters pendant, the energy and stuff, that came from the crowd, and obviously all the people in the crowd weren't gay or whatever, a lot of them were straight, but it was like they were going to tear down the barriers, you know. And I never will forget that the grandstand, Mayor Feinstein and some other people, when we were coming up, they were straining their necks to try to see. Who is this that the people are reacting to like that? I can't tell you the energy, we were just blown away because to me, I'm saying why in the world would these guys be so resistant. Some of the Station 6 complaints I heard where they were saying derogatory stuff to people in the neighborhood and doing all this. What are you doing, you know? These are citizens too. They have a right, just like any other group in this city. They're paying your salary too, just like other people are paying your salary.

It was interesting though, one of the firefighters, he was saying that the guys at Station 1 and stuff, well a lot of the guys in the department were mad because we were out there in uniform. One of the guys was saying, "Yeah, Bob [was] bashing me for doing it and said, 'Is Bob gay?'" And when the Black Firefighters told me, I said, "Tell him to ask me." He said, "Now Bob, you know he's not going to ask you that." That was an experience for me because of the way we were received. We had received support from members of that community before and that's one of the reasons too we was out there, giving back, showing them we appreciate it. But following that, the support was just, like I said, was just great from people.

04-01:47:33

Farrell: Did it feel, to receive that support and things that you had worked so hard for, was that a satisfying feeling for you?

04-01:47:45

Demmons:

I'll tell you what happened. When we got the consent decree and my mentor, Carl Holmes, had told me, he said, "Your biggest job is going to be holding that organization together." Particularly, when we got to the individual complaints for being harassed, and that's why that's so personal, now it becomes personal. I would go into some of those—well, I had to go and meet with the Black Firefighters and their individual attorneys. That was really stressful. What got me was some of them that had experienced real serious, real serious stuff, but then there were some that had experienced things, but they weren't in that sphere. Anything is too much, but they were going in [saying], "I want \$5 million." They were taking it out on these attorneys that were volunteering. That was really, really stressful for me. Everyone was saying, "We want to wait and see what Bob—." Well, they don't know what I went through, what my family and stuff went through, and how we suffered and stuff, so you can't equate your thing. You know, you look at what you went through and you should be compensated for that, not compensated for what I went through. So that was a time too, that, coupled with other things, where I really was considering leaving the department. I really didn't get to enjoy the fruits of all that labor to the extent that I should have been able to enjoy it, you know, because of that, but there was so much.

I think the real benefit that I had was that I had the opportunity, and took the opportunity, to find out what was going on in the country with other departments, whereas most of the people in San Francisco always had a closed environment that they were in. They had no clue as to what was going on outside and they fed one another just what they learned. And the thing, if I'd have just relied on learning and gaining experience from there, I'd have been nowhere. But I was able to get information and find out things, and learn from the experiences that other people had in the departments, things that other departments were doing.

I'll give you an example. This training thing, you see the picture over there, that my mentor started. We were getting like 300 people from all over and some from the Caribbean. We even had several from Africa and stuff who would come to that one-week training. What it is, it's a total learning environment, and the instructors volunteer, but you're instructing things that you've done, not something you've read. That was one of the things. You interact, the instructors and students interact with one another, even though most of the instructors are chiefs, but not necessarily so.

I never will forget, this is when I was chief, and we were having a problem implementing or dealing with something dealing with EMS, the paramedics, that came up. I was watching after the class—well, the classes go from eight until the evening session is usually eight-thirty, nine. We have an evening session, so a full day, a full weekday of working. After the evening session, I was in the hospitality room or whatever, we all stayed in the dorms on the campus. These two paramedics from Southern California—and everybody

was watching the NBA [National Basketball Association] finals because it was about that time of the year. I was talking to the guys and I found out that they were both paramedics. I said, "Oh, paramedics, I'm trying to deal with this situation in San Francisco." They said, "Oh Chief, we had that problem and this is how we dealt with it." I went back to San Francisco, implemented it. I don't remember what it was exactly, problem solved.

04-01:52:00

Farrell: Wow.

04-01:52:02

Demmons: So that's what I was saying about it's not—talking about range. This is talking about experience and stuff.

04-01:52:10

Farrell: So I think that may be a good place to leave it for today and then next time when we come back we'll talk about the strategic plan, the EMS merger, the termination of the dissent decree, and I want to talk about your work with the Ford Foundation as well.

04-01:53:24

Demmons: Okay.

04-01:53:26

Farrell: Okay, thank you.

04-01:53:27

Demmons: No, thank you.

Interview 5: August 5, 2016

05-00:00:20

Farrell: Okay, this is Shanna Farrell with Robert Demmons on Friday, August 5, 2016, and this is our fifth interview for the San Francisco Fire Department, California Firefighters oral history project. Robert, when we left off last time, we were talking about some of the work that you did when you were chief of the department. One of the big things was the strategic plan that you were working on. I was wondering if you could tell me a little bit about the development of the strategic plan and the retreats that you held to work on that.

05-00:00:57

Demmons: Sure. Prior to being appointed that's one of the things that I presented to Mayor Brown before I was interviewed by him. I had said that I wanted to have retreats and bring everybody in the department to have them look at their responsibility for their job and clearly understand what their role is in providing a service to the citizens. I felt that to do that I wanted to get away from the past, where not only in San Francisco I saw a lot of other departments around the country where everything was dependent upon the chief of the department, to run things and do things. As I stated, the federal judge had ruled the department had a lack of management skills and stuff, and so she had ordered the department to hire a management consultant to come in and teach our management and train them in management skills. When management consultant came, he was hired and after almost \$500,000, he was let go because the company couldn't accomplish the goal. But that wasn't the first time. Over the years, they had hired different consultants to come in and they always came in and when they left, the only thing that had changed was the taxpayers' money had been reduced in terms of helping the fire department and the problems still persisted.

I looked at it in terms of as chief that would be my responsibility, or any chief's responsibility, to do what's necessary to make sure the department is managed. I looked at it as I was a consultant and that every member of that department was part of the team. I decided to have a three-day retreat. I hired a facilitator that was recommended and he was excellent, from UC Davis, and so he came and we went over things. Prior to the retreat, I had sent a general order to all the members of the department, every member, uniformed and civilian, to identify any problems that they were facing in carrying out their job, any problems that they saw that the department as a whole had, and submit possible solutions to both. Also, prior to that, even before I was interviewed, I had looked at all the problems that I could find with everyone from the civil grand jury to you name it, that had talked about, from the supervisors, everybody, the union, everybody, had talked about over the years, that they saw in the department. So I had all that down.

So during the retreat, all the chiefs, all the employee organizations, executive boards, and all the civilians that were in supervisory and management

positions, were invited to the retreat; it was a three-day retreat. They were to go over their responsibilities and what I wanted to focus on was the department's mission and value statements, and I wanted to make sure that everything that we were doing lined up with our mission as a department and our values. So that was the theme that I gave the facilitator, that I wanted to move toward. I was really, really pleased with what went on in those sessions.

I saw some firefighters, chief officers that had been in the department twenty-some years and longer, and had been—I didn't really see them really doing things before, but they really were real honest and open about identifying the problems and stuff. That was really was encouraging to me to see that, that no one was holding back. They really opened up and really interacted with one another in those meetings and put things forth. Following that, I assigned all of the chiefs and civilian leaders to oversee different areas. Those areas, like I said, we broke down the mission statement and the value statement and everything that we did was under parts of that, different parts of that. So that's what we did with that, and so they went to work.

Obviously, I held a second and a third, later, and we put together an accomplishment report in terms of what the department had accomplished. It was just so much that everybody was really impressed, even a lot of the firefighters were really impressed with what had been going on and what had been accomplished. That was a big thing and during that time, the court monitor was getting on me, saying that, "Chief, you're supposed to hire a consultant. You're not supposed to do this yourself. You're putting yourself in the position of being held in contempt." What I did was I said, "Well, if I'm held in contempt for doing my job, then I guess I have to be held in contempt." I didn't tell her that but that's that attitude I told myself. We moved forward and what was so great about it was also, the judge had appointed one of the former fire commissioners, Jim Jefferson, as the special master. There were two individuals that were overseeing the consent decree on behalf of the federal court, and that was Jim Jefferson, who was the special master, and then we had the court monitor, Tamar Pachter. She really was looking at things from a legal perspective and he was lending his management skills to what was going on.

So we moved on and I kept finding myself at odds with the court monitor. Fortunately, the special master, he saw what we were doing and saw what was going on, and so they were kind of in opposition. Eventually, as you know, the judge looked at what we did and she eventually ended the consent decree. It was because of the work that the members of that fire department had done themselves, to prove that they could manage. They had been managing for a couple years and doing an excellent job, and so that's how we got out of the consent decree, on top of meeting the long-term goals in a short time, in terms of bringing diversity into the department. In other words, the goal was 10 percent women, and I accelerated the hiring of women. We got over 10 percent and the same thing with minorities. Particularly, my main focus was

on the Asian American community because they were clearly underrepresented in terms of their population in the city. My view was and still is, that the San Francisco Fire Department, it is a family organization, but the family is the city as a whole. So every member of the city has a right to be represented in that department, just like any family would have a family business, obviously, they would hire people from their family. But again, that was the goal, and so I hired a great number of women, and particularly Asian Americans, during that period, to bring their numbers up respectfully.

05-00:10:27

Farrell:

How did you feel about the termination of the consent decree? Was that something that you were in support of?

05-00:10:33

Demmons:

Yes, because I felt that it wasn't the federal court's job to run the department. Again, that was the same thing. When I talked about the consultants, I felt that the members had shown that they were capable of managing. We had worked hard to put things in place. In fact, in one of the meetings with the attorneys—and obviously, the attorneys on the other side had been my attorneys, and so there was a lot of discussions. I understood also, and even with the court monitor, that once the consent decree ended, that ended whatever income, monetary we were receiving, would end, whatever income that the public interest lawyers were receiving would end. I understood that, but I had enough faith in the lawyers and stuff, that they put, you know the public, because they're in that business, they're public interest lawyers. So I felt confidence in that.

It was interesting, one of the meetings were having, I had said well it's sort of like the Wizard of Oz. I said, it was sort of like Dorothy, when she was trying to see the wizard and looking for the wizard to do all the things for her, and I said well, I look at the federal court as the wizard and the members of the department as Dorothy. And I said, all they have to do is click our heels, and I said all the department has to do is click their ruby slippers and find their way home in terms of managing themselves. I also looked at the politicians, the supervisors and the rest, and part of their job also, is to make sure the fire department is functioning in the way it should function. Not just to give the department money, you know, but to see how they're using that money and making sure that they're doing the things that they need to do to serve the public.

So, I looked at all these different things and plus, the fact that we didn't reach the goals we had, but one of the things was that eventually, before I retired, we were able to move four women into the chief ranks. We had other minorities and stuff, to the management, administrative positions and stuff. So I looked at all of that in terms of where we needed to go and where we needed to go was to not have court monitors or special masters or other people, trying to figure out what we're doing and trying to give us direction and so forth.

The judge didn't completely eliminate the consent decree right away, but she did take away a lot of the reporting requirements and things, and then a year, we continued to make progress near the end. So I felt good, but I knew there was still work to do in terms of putting things in place and changing the culture of the department.

I mentioned some of the training and some of the other things, but the biggest thing was the examinations. The biggest problems that I found with the exams was the lack of security in the exams, and then some of the exams aren't really job related. So I looked at this things that really needed to have more work done in those areas.

05-00:15:12

Farrell:

Did you feel that the department would still work towards the goals of the consent decree in the future? Did you feel like, you know—I know that you had made a lot of progress while you were chief, but were you confident that that was still going to continue?

05-00:15:29

Demmons:

I had confidence that it would. Obviously, after I retired, I saw some things that didn't, and I think the biggest thing is the powers that be. When I saw the powers that be, I mean particularly, the politicians and also, I had a lot of confidence that the members of the department would do things. In some areas, I saw that that didn't happen the way I hoped it would happen, but I see some things that, you know, are sort of disappointing as I look back now, but there's some things that I'm really pleased with also.

05-01:16:18

Farrell:

And how did the coalition respond to the end of the consent decree?

05-00:16:24

Demmons:

Well, like I said, there was a lot of discussion before we agreed. I think one of the big factors was they knew me pretty well, and I think they had a lot of faith in me. Sometimes they seemed a little unsure of what would happen after I left, and that's what I was really trying to do the entire time, was to change the department, so it wasn't dependent on me being the chief. And so they seemed, you know, obviously, they had been working for years on this. They were real happy with the goals and the progress, and they made that clear, but I'm not sure that they had as much faith in things continuing after I left, as I did.

05-00:17:39

Farrell:

Then, so a few other things that you had accomplished while you were Chief. You had established a public information officer and community affairs officer position, and can you tell me a little bit about the impetus for establishing that and kind of what their role is and maybe how that's changed the department?

05-00:18:07

Demmons:

Obviously, one of the biggest things is interacting with the community. You know, you see, you hear a lot, particularly with the police department, community relations and so forth, with the community. Well, that was one of the things that I wanted to ensure, and particularly, like a lot of the youngsters. I had some of the fire engines going in different communities and letting the kids climb on the engines and do stuff like that. Also, I wanted a policy where the stations were open. I wanted the people in the community to know that that's their fire station. It was real interesting, there were two stations in the Bayview-Hunters Point area, which as you know is predominantly African American, and one of the stations, when they built it, I think it was right after some of the riots, and there was like all metal station, with no windows, the windows are horizontal, and they have metal, where they can close up the windows.

The other station, they referred to it as Fort Shafter, it's on Shafter Avenue, and it didn't really sink in to me, it took years for me to realize why they referred to it as Fort Shafter. In other words, they're in a hostile area and this is their fort, and that was really, you know, when I found out. In fact, I had called it Fort Shafter, out of ignorance. I didn't realize what was going on. It took a few years for me to put things together and see. So, I wanted them to also have open houses periodically, where the community could come in. I also partnered with the Red Cross, because I had gone through their program, where they teach you CPR and so forth, and to offer that training and stuff in the stations, and just to interact. Part of it was too, that I know years ago, when the firefighters lived in Sunset and the Richmond areas, they lived not too far from the stations they worked in, and it was always open to their families and stuff. That was one of the things, and some of the other programs, we were able to get one of the boat owners, fishing boat owners, to take kids out on fishing trips. So different programs like that, and so we really wanted to let the community and communicate to the community that this was their department, and so that's what we tried to do.

It was real interesting, one holiday, I decided to try to go to all of the stations in one day, and so we went around and it was really great, to do that, and a lot of the members of the department, in fact, I remember one old timer, he says chief, you know, you're the first chief that ever came out to our station, thank you. And I said wow, you know, that meant a lot to me. I didn't obviously spend a lot of time in the different stations, but I went there. Some of them were out and so I didn't get to all of them, but I got to a majority of them.

05-00:22:12

Farrell:

How have you seen the public information officer and community affairs officers' roles evolve over time? Are they pretty much the same function?

05-00:22:24

Demmons:

There was two positions and I don't know if you recall Ed Campbell. In fact, after I retired, he was the—what I did was like I said, all the discretionary

positions, I advertised them department-wide, and said anyone that feels that they meet the criteria to fill those positions to apply. Like I said, I wanted to get away from that thing where the chief just picked who they liked and so forth. That was one of the changes I was trying to make, cultural change.

So, I had Commissioner Hadley Roff, who had been a reporter and stuff before he was Deputy Mayor under Mayor Feinstein, as one of the interviewers and stuff, and so we went through a process. Ed Campbell came out number one, and so he did well in both interviews. We were trying to get a new NERT coordinator and a PIO, so I selected him, which turned out to be an outstanding choice, because I got a lot of compliments. It was sort of hard. I know that the reporters were used to the chiefs giving all the critiques and things, and interviews, at large fires, but again, when I said I always wanted to make things happen where they're supposed to happen, so when we created the PIO position and broadened it in terms of that, he was the one that they would go to and it turned out great. Eventually, some of them, you know, when I would refer them, when I was trying to deal with the fire, some of the reporters would come up and want to interview me, and I wanted to focus on keeping my people safe and keeping the citizens safe, making sure that things went right.

And so some of them got a little upset, because they weren't used to that, when I would refer them to the PIO, but then after a while, they really liked it, because not only were they able to get information on the scene, but they would also have follow-up things, when they were writing stories or doing whatever they were doing, they established a relationship with the PIO, where he would do follow-up with them and help them do their job better and do a more thorough job of reporting on what happened, whatever the incident was. It wasn't just emergency; it was other things that, you know, would come up in the city. So that worked out well.

05-00:25:30

Farrell: You had mentioned NERT. Can you tell me what NERT stands for?

05-00:25:38

Demmons: Neighborhood Emergency Response Team.

05-00:25:41

Farrell: Perfect, thank you. And can you tell me a little bit—so that is sort of a third-party organization?

05-00:25:50

Demmons: It's civilians.

05-00:25:51

Farrell: Yeah. And it was established before you were chief. Can you tell me a little bit about how you were involved with NERT while you were chief and how the department interacted?

05-00:26:07

Demmons: Well, as you know, that's a great group, and they do—[phone rings]. Ready?

05-00:26:30

Farrell: Yeah.

05-00:25:33

Demmons: So what it is, obviously, it's a group of civilians that are trained to help out their neighbors in earthquakes or any other type of major disaster, where fire professionals have their hands full trying to do the things that they have to do, and it's a great program. In fact, there are several programs similar, all around the country now. What happened was that some of the leaders of the program, they wanted to separate NERT from the fire department and establish it as a separate nonprofit, run by them in terms of that. And so that was something that I didn't want to see happen, and obviously, it was a very touchy situation and I had to really think about how I was going to deal with that, because these individuals were volunteering their time and they were committed to that, but I felt that it was the fire department's responsibility to protect citizens, and so that was our responsibility, even in the charter and so forth. That was one of the things that I did when I first became president of the Black Firefighters. I got a copy of the city charter and civil service rules, and read it, all of it, even the parts that didn't pertain to the fire department. So, I discussed it with the city attorney, deputy city attorney that was assigned to the fire department at the time, and said let them know that we can't just hand off our responsibility to a group of civilians, I said, and I need you to help me explain that to them, because I don't want to offend them in any way or create any ill feelings between the department. [phone rings] Somebody else.

05-00:29:03

Farrell: Somebody else? It's okay, I mean it's no big deal.

05-00:29:19

Demmons: I hope that one don't ring. So, I guess we were talking about NERT and stuff. And so it turned out, after it was explained to them that we can't delegate that to civilians, that's part of our job and part of our responsibility, it worked out. But like I said, they do a great job, I mean I can't over-emphasize what a great job they do.

05-00:29:55

Farrell: One of the other things you did was there were some facility renovations. Can you tell me a little bit about that?

05-00:30:02

Demmons: Yes. What I did again, my whole idea about having members of the department take responsibility for everything, and I knew, and still know, that almost anything that you—any type of work, things that you need, there are people in the fire department that can do it and do a good job. So what I did was I wanted a member of the department to oversee and to deal with the contractors that were renovating the station, to accommodate both genders.

Plus, we had some of the stations had to be retrofitted to meet earthquake proof standards, and so I just didn't want to rely on contractors to come in and have complete control and not know what's going on, and making sure that we're getting what we are paying for and not overpaying for what we're getting. So what I did was again, I advertised for someone with a construction background and also, I spoke with the deputies, when we were talking, and they knew some of the people that were good. You find a lot of firefighters have construction backgrounds and a lot of them do that as a second job. So I knew that, and I was trying to find someone that I could depend on.

One of the individuals, he told the deputies, you know he says yeah, I'll do it, and give me a promotion and give me a car, and when the deputy told me I said what in the world? And I had known the guy for a lot of years and that sort of surprised me, that he had that kind of attitude, and so obviously, I didn't select that person and I found another person, Gary Massetani, and so he stepped up and just did an outstanding job. Also, like I said, he informed and said well chief, this contractor wants to do this and that's not necessary, or they don't want to do this and it is necessary, and the price he's charging for this is a little high. So he really did an outstanding job in that and so it went real well. Eventually, he was able to move up to being one of the deputy chiefs from one of the battalions. So that's again, a member of the department that really stepped forward.

05-00:33:10

Farrell:

What were some of the stations that had the biggest renovations?

05-00:33:20

Demmons:

Mostly the double station houses, where you had two or more apparatus, some of them with the chiefs. So those were some of the older stations and again, like I said, it wasn't just dealing with the gender issue. It was also, just like the new headquarters, the reason we had to move out of the other headquarters was because they said when you talk about public safety, individuals, the standard for earthquake proof and resistance is higher. In fact, the old headquarters, people are in there now, but we had to move out of there because of that, and the same thing with some of the stations. So all of the stations were evaluated in terms of whether they needed it, but the larger stations and the older stations were some of the ones that needed most of the work.

05-00:34:21

Farrell:

And then one of the other biggest things was the EMS merger. That started in 1997 and leading up to that, stations had paramedics, but they weren't integrated into the department. Can you tell me a little bit about the merger and how that came up?

05-00:34:43

Demmons:

Well, as I stated before, over 70 percent of the calls at one time were medical in nature, and that's not just San Francisco, that's around the country.

Fortunately, fire calls have been going down over the years, due to great safety practices and code enforcement and things like that. As I stated, one of the things that was frustrating to me when I first became a firefighter, was going to emergencies and seeing individuals with medical conditions and being limited in terms of my knowledge on what to do and how to treat them. Like I said, at that time, the only people really, that were even EMTs, let alone paramedics, were members of the rescue squad, and a lot of the firefighters sort of looked down on medical people. In other words, some of them had the macho attitude, you know, it's more macho to go in fires than it is to treat people medically, give them medical treatment.

So it came up that we were having—in looking at trying to improve the medical response to the citizens, it was felt that the fire department could do a better job in coordinating. In other words, the two functions, with the fire department having 70-plus percent of their calls medical, and the ambulance, the health department, ambulance service, having 100 percent of theirs medical. So looking at that and looking at how to get trained medical professionals on the scene as quickly as possible, because a lot of times, time is critical. And so, Dr. Hernandez was over that, and so we had several meetings, and then we had meetings before the Civil Service Commission. And so it was pretty tough, because the Firefighters Union and stuff, there was a lot of resistance to merging, but eventually, we got it done.

Prior to that, in fact earlier, the department started training—this was before the consent decree was finalized, but during that period, part of the training that the Division of Training included, EMT training, which really hadn't been part of it until the negotiations were going on in terms of the consent decree. So, what I wanted to do was to train firefighters that wanted to be paramedics firefighters, to set up a training in the department where we can make that happen, so they didn't have to go outside the department to get that training. So they were getting EMT training at the entry level, and the firefighters that were in the department already and wanted to become paramedics, we had an in-house paramedic training program once we did the merger, and set it up over at the presidio and some of the paramedics that came over from the health department were the instructors and stuff. So it turned out well, because I even had departments down the peninsula, who paid San Francisco to train their people in that. So the whole thing about training was great too.

One thing I mentioned before was the Navy had this live firefighting school on Treasure Island, and when the Navy was leaving, I got word that if they shut down that training, live burn center, that it would take an environmental impact study to reopen it. So we only had a short timeframe to try to take it over from the Navy, and the deputies didn't think that we were going to be successful, but that's when it pays to have a person in the Senate or Congress. Senator Feinstein pushed it through, and so we got it, and it turned out to be invaluable. It's still invaluable now. So, one of the deputies for a long time out

there, every now and then he would say, "Chief, I didn't think you would be able to." I said, "Well, we had help." And I think Hadley Roff, the commissioner, also had something to do in helping us get the support from Senator Feinstein, so she pushed it through and we got it.

One of the problems we had after we obtained it was, when the Federal Government ran it, where they could bring the propane across the bridge, which you can't bring propane across the bridge. And so now we say, how are we going to get the propane to there? We finally came up with a solution, and we brought it over on a barge, that got it there, but that was interesting, because like I said, the Federal Government had the power to shut the bridge down until the truck got to Treasure Island and so forth, but we didn't obviously have that kind of power and authority. But I was really pleased that we were able to get that facility, and then really, I was over there a couple months ago, and they've really done some great things and they're still using it.

05-00:41:34

Farrell:

Can you tell me about some of the challenges, aside from that, that you faced in the merger? I've heard that sometimes, I've heard that there were some—within stations, there were some issues between firefighters and paramedics who were coming in and not being treated fairly.

05-00:42:07

Demmons:

Yes. That was going on, but one of the things that I heard some of them, particularly after I retired, I heard some of this stuff, but that was one of the advantages that we had during that period, was that everybody in the department knew that they were going to be held accountable, and everyone knew that management wasn't going to tolerate people being mistreated. But there were complaints saying that they had a lot of calls, and so some of the firefighters felt that they were being made uncomfortable, because of that, which is ridiculous, that's where you work. But that was some of the complaints that I heard. And then I heard complaints from some of the paramedics, and they were in certain parts of the city which is getting more calls, and they were complaining.

Well, the way the firefighters work is there are some stations that you don't get as many calls, so if you don't like to go on a lot of calls, you put in for those stations. Well, some of the paramedics wanted to have their cake and eat it too. They wanted to be in a busy area, but they were complaining about being busy, if that makes sense. No, it didn't make sense to me either. That was some of the major things that they were complaining about, how many calls they were making. I can think of two or three of them in particular, you know, that were complaining, and I obviously said, you know, you can go to another area of the city and be assigned there, but they didn't want to do that. So, those were some of the problems that we had.

One of the things that eventually, like I said, after I retired, they got rid of the training, which I felt really disappointed in that, because a lot of the firefighters—well, I won't say a lot. Quite a few of them were going and taking advantage of that training. Then the other thing is they moved them out of the firehouses after I retired, and I think that was a mistake, because one of the things too, is that you have more—if you have them in the firehouse, it's just like if there's something, a lot of medical calls going on, or some disaster, whatever is going on in a certain part of the city, it's like we do on the fire engines, the fire trucks, we cover in. In other words, if you deplete this area of its fire engines and fire trucks, you bring in other engines and trucks from other parts of the city, into their station; you know to staff their station until they can return back on duty.

One of the things that I think that happens when you don't have them in the firehouses too, a lot of times—you've probably seen them—they'll sit under the freeways and stuff, and if they had to go report back to the firehouse, you know they're going back in service and you know that they're available. So you don't really know whether they're still in service or out of service when you see them on the side streets and different places like that.

05-00:46:02

Farrell:

I saw one.

05-00:46:03

Demmons:

And plus, you don't move them out of the station, because they have been mistreated and because the firefighters are uncomfortable, you know you don't let that happen. I recall one time, you heard me talk about Jimmie Braden, the firefighter that fell off the truck, but before that, the different things they were doing to him. You know, they wouldn't let him eat with them and all that stuff, and so Chief Casper, at the time, called me in, and the vice president, into his office, and he said well Bob, because I'm concerned about Jimmie's safety and so forth, so I'm going to move him to another station. And so that upset me and I said well, that's up to Jimmie, as far as I'm concerned. I said, as long as he's doing his job, he should be able to work in any station. And I said, "But if it was me, I wouldn't allow you to move me." He got real upset obviously, with me saying that, and I'm just a firefighter and he's chief of the department. And so he got upset and he said, "Well, Bob, if you don't like the way things are going in this department, you can leave." I said no, I said, "If anybody leaves, you're the one that needs to leave, your position is the appointed position." I said, "I'm civil service." And so that's kind of some of the stuff that used to go on back and forth. Obviously, when I was representing the Black Firefighters, I would represent them when I was a firefighter, and then my role as a firefighter, obviously, I wouldn't talk to him like that.

05-00:47:56

Farrell:

I guess speaking of that, how did you, working with the city administration, how did that change over time or how did that develop? How did you learn how to work best with the administration?

05-00:48:18

Demmons:

Well, you know it was interesting, I found out one of the things was that, as you know, the police and fire even have a separate retirement and sort of different from the miscellaneous employees, and what I found was that some of the firefighters, obviously not all, didn't really show a lot of respect for a lot of people at city hall. And as I stated before, during the early years, some of the miscellaneous employees that were in positions of dealing with fire department issues and stuff, really supported me, not openly, but they would support our efforts by letting me know different things they were doing in that area.

To give you an example of how some of the firefighters were, there were two EEO that worked for the city, and one of them told me at one time—because at that time, some of the people in the union leadership had a reputation of drinking a lot, being drunk a lot. And so she told me that one of the union executive board members was in a meeting with the civil service EEO people, and one of the leaders grabbed her leg under the table, and to feel comfortable doing something like that, it kind of speaks—but the one that told me that, told me that the other one didn't want her to tell me, and you know, I guess she didn't want to bring heat on herself, by me bringing it up, but that's the kind of intimidation factor, not bringing that up, which is you know, I hate to bring that up, but I'm trying to get across, just how intimidating fire and police can be, to other city employees. That's the only reason I brought that up and like I said, this was the head EEO person that he did this to, okay?

And then afterwards, some of the—like I said, two of the supervisors kind of didn't have a real positive relationship with me particularly, and unfortunately, one of them is in prison now. I guess you know who I'm talking about. At one point, they were trying to eliminate the chief operator's job and calling them chauffeurs, but chief operators do more than drive the chief. Just like you have somebody that drives a fire engine, they do more than drive the fire engine. Like I said before, the chief operators, to me were invaluable positions, because particularly, it started when you didn't have radios, but even at that, several times, I would go in and even after they gave the officers radios, and I've had several of them give the chief the wrong information, and plus, as an operator, you can view the entire fire scene and give them a report, because they're outside and they can't see in. So you're their eyes and ears inside, you know.

So, what happened was they were trying to eliminate that position and it really upset me when they were referring to them as chauffeurs, and so I said they do more than that. So the finance committee, as I stated, it was the two

supervisors that seemed to be not really on at least my side, which was the department side too, so they voted to take it before the full board, to eliminate the position. So when that came before the board, the vote came down 9-2, in favor of my position, the department's position, and that kind of stunned the one supervisor. In fact, he came up to me and said, "Bob, you really kicked my butt." I said, "No, that's not it." I said the other supervisor just saw what needed to be done and they did it.

05-00:53:36

Farrell: And then, so you left the department and retired in 2000. Can you tell me about, I guess leaving the department?

05-00:53:46

Demmons: About? I'm sorry.

05-00:53:47

Farrell: Leaving the department.

05-00:53:50

Demmons: Well, I left on my appointment date, July 29th, so at that point, not that it was about—it was interesting, not long after I was appointed chief, I would run into other chiefs from around the country, at the convention and different places, and they would say oh, well Bob, when will you be able to retire? I was thinking like, okay, they look at this whole thing as what you want to do is you want to get to be chief or you want to get to be as high as you can, so that you'll have a nice retirement, and not saying you want to be chief or whatever so you can improve the department. I see that going on now. In fact, I heard that from a few people in San Francisco, you know, not the chief of the department but some of the battalion chiefs; I only have so long to go before—and that tells me a lot about them, that they're not really interested in doing what they should be doing, and that is improving the service to the citizens.

At that point, I reached a point, and I always sort of looked at my position as sort of like the Marine Corps, as opposed to the Army. The Marines are an assault group, they go and take over islands, make changes and stuff, and when I was in the Marine Corps, of course all military people do an outstanding job, I don't have to tell you that, everybody should recognize that, and that it's just different roles. The Air Force had their role, but the Marines, you know, you're going to try to make your position the top position, you know you can't blame people for that. I feel proud to be a Marine, I wouldn't want to be anything—former Marine. I wouldn't want to be anything else. But they talk about how the Marines would take over, you know the Marines take over an area and then turn it over to the Army, and they maintain it and defend it. Well, that's the way I looked at myself. The department was in a situation where it had to make changes and stuff, and you're going to get a lot of people that resent you if you're making changes, I knew that. In fact, I told Mayor Brown, I said with all the changes that I have to make in that department, I

said I probably have two years before they really started coming after me and undermining me and doing all the stuff that they're capable of doing. And so as it turned out, I had almost five years, and so I felt that at that point, now there was obviously some other programs that I had started, that I thought about seeing through, but again, I didn't want it to be about me.

One of the things that you—several factors, and I was tired, okay? I had put in a lot of effort and a lot of work into that department. The other part is that when you look at how much you, if you're getting full retirement—of course now, they get even a larger percentage when they retire, firefighters, but you look at that and it's almost like you're working for nothing if you keep working. But the main thing was that I looked at some of the programs that I had started, that I wanted, you know to make sure that they went through. But I looked at what we had accomplished and I felt that now, the department was getting to the point to where they would just, like I said, like the Army, you know just the main thing. And plus, I wanted to look at different things. I knew I wasn't going to just sit back, you know, and play golf. In fact, a good friend of mine, he had been the—I think I might have mentioned him before. He had been the president of the L.A. County and City Black Firefighters, they were one chapter, and he had sued his department. He was in L.A. County. He retired as an assistant chief, but he took his department all the way to the supreme court, mainly to get other people promoted and stuff. So after I retired and I was still doing stuff, he said Bob, he says you know, you ought to get you—he plays golf a lot and he says, "You ought to get you a set of golf clubs and play golf." I said well, "Herschel, I don't think I could concentrate on my golf game when I see problems going on around this country." And I said that I feel that I may be able to help or contribute to solving them.

One of the big things that I have always seen, and that is the hiring and promotional exam and process, as one of the biggest problems, because I truly believe that if you give valid, job-related exams, and you maintain the security of those exams, that you will have the departments that represent the cities that they serve. So, I truly believe that, and so one of the things that I wanted to do, in fact, when I went to that Harvard program, when we were all supposed to submit a challenge that we faced. I submitted the challenge that I faced, and I wanted to come up with a way to maintain and to continue diversity in the fire service, without the courts doing it. And so that's what I wanted to try to do. What happened, after I retired, I still wanted to try to figure out how to do that and I was still looking at ways to do that. The cadet program, we came up with, that was one of the things that worked real well.

One of the attorneys, Denise Hewlett, I got with her and talked about one of the problems is it's not only the exam and the selection process, but a lot of things that are in opposition to bringing about diversity, particularly with women. I said that one of the biggest problems is the firefighters union nationally, because they obviously want to keep control and have as much control. There's nothing with people wanting control, but there is something

wrong with it when you're controlling other individuals lives and you're controlling areas that you're not really supposed to be controlling. And so I had this plan, and so we presented it to the Ford Foundation. In fact, I made you a copy. And what I felt that needed to be done was to look at everything that was in place, that either helped or hindered. For instance, one of the components I wanted to look at was the press, and the role that the media, not just the press the entire media, the role that they had in influencing public opinion and influencing the—which in turn would influence the powers that be, the politicians and stuff, and in terms of making sure that things were put into place that would allow all the citizens that were qualified to become firefighters and to make sure that the people with management skills and stuff were the ones that were managing those departments. So, that was one area.

I wanted to look at also, the influence that employee organizations had, influence that the politicians had, so all these different areas. And so the Ford Foundation, and the other one, what we did was we broke it down into two categories. One category was to come up with solutions. We wanted to make public, the different things, and document the different things that worked against bringing about diversity. And the groups are individuals, not really individual, there are more groups in position, that were involved in it, either positively or negatively. So, we wanted to that, and the second phase was to come up with a selection process similar to the cadet program, that could be used in dealing with recruitment, hiring, testing and so forth. So, we received two grants, the attorney and I. One was for \$600,000, and the other one was for \$625,000. And what I saw myself really working as a director, so we were going to be co-directors of the first project, and a lot of the data and the information that we got out of the first grant was going to be used in the second grant. So, unfortunately, what happened was that the attorney and I started seeing things differently. She wanted to focus on focus groups, interviewing women around the country, in the fire service, and I said, well we have that information, because we got a lot of that when we were dealing with the consent decree. And then she brought in a second attorney—

Let me back up. So what happened was the person at Ford said it would be hard to justify two directors, and so I said well, I'll just be a director, but I'll just work at half the salary, I said, because she had an eight year-old daughter and she was a single parent at the time, and that was her only source of income. "I have my retirement," I said, "so we can do it that way." So that's how we proceeded, even though I was paid part-time, I was working full-time, obviously. And so what happened when the other attorney came onboard, one of the things that really bothered me was like several meetings, it seems as though she felt that I couldn't be in the group when she was meeting with other women. And I was saying what is that saying about me, like you know. And so it eventually got to where it appeared that the money was being spent on the focus group and the other attorney was receiving huge amounts of money. So, we didn't get along that well.

The second part, I was just going to work as a consultant, I wasn't going to be a director on the second grant, but after that, I said well I need to take that. So what we agreed to, what we did, we had sent out surveys and stuff to departments and got all kinds of information before, for the first grant, and obviously, using my contacts and stuff. Eventually, we felt it was best that she finish up that first one, and then I would take the other one, on developing the selection process, as the lone director. So that's what we did, and I think you saw the—I gave you a copy of just the final report, but obviously, we had a lot of—so I hired different people. I hired Dr. Gephardt to put together a physical agility process that can be used, and Dr. Outtz, PhD, who it was—what had happened was—that's something different.

05-01:08:26

Farrell:

Oh, that's different, okay.

05-01:08:31

Demmons:

Dr. Outtz, who had been involved when the city hired him during the consent decrees, he hired a group of consultants, industrial psychologists, and George Riley, you heard me talk about, the deputy city attorney, so when I was looking to hire someone, George Riley told me that Dr. Outtz, in his opinion, and I relied on George a lot, was the top person in the country. I said, "Is that right?" He said, "Yeah, by far." He said he was the one who came up with the banding process for the city of San Francisco. So I contacted him and he came aboard, and we really put together, what I still believe is an outstanding selection process. One of the things that happens is that again, I talked about who controls these fire departments, and a lot of times, some of these chiefs of the department, and probably mayors, city managers, don't really want to make those changes, you know, they give a lot of lip service to diversity and a lot of them really don't want women in the fire department. Some of them that do, don't do the things that are necessary, because of the political ramifications, because of the unions, that can really go after you and eliminate your career. So that's what happens.

05-01:10:38

Farrell:

And just to clarify, the Ford grant was the \$625,000 or the \$600,000?

05-01:10:48

Demmons:

There was two, one was \$600,000.

05-01:10:51

Farrell:

So they were both from the Ford Foundation?

05-01:10:52

Demmons:

Yes.

05-01:10:53

Farrell:

Oh, I see, okay, so it was like part one, part two. Okay.

05-01:10:58

Demmons:

It was one million-two. Like I said, I wanted to—the first grant, I wanted to use the money for what we said, in other words research and getting someone from the media that we had confidence in, to help us put that part together and to pay them that, and to get all the different areas and bring in different experts. But they wanted to just focus on talking to the women and hearing their problems, and I continue to say that's fine, but that's not what we were supposed to be doing.

05-01:11:39

Farrell:

Right.

05-01:11:40

Demmons:

We already know what the problem is pretty much, because we've heard enough from some of the women while we were dealing with the consent decree.

05-01:11:50

Farrell:

You've been involved in some other work as well. Can you tell me a little bit about what else you've been up to since then?

05-01:12:00

Demmons:

Afterwards, we formed a company, Mission Alignment Solutions, and part of that is to help departments align their mission with their job functions, like we did in San Francisco, and to do all that. We didn't really—before we got really doing a lot of the work, one of the key individuals, Binnie Singh, as I told you, she decided to go and work toward her masters. Not her masters, she had her masters, toward her PhD, and that's what she's doing now, so we're sort of not doing stuff like that until she finishes, and hopefully within the year.

05-01:13:09

Farrell:

And I guess I wanted to ask you some more reflective questions. They're sort of big, but however you want to answer them is fine. I'm wondering what it's meant to you, to have become part of the San Francisco Fire Department's historical legacy? I mean, you're largely responsible for integrating the department and for increasing the diversity, and that I think has become part of its legacy. Yeah, what's that meant to you?

05-01:13:45

Demmons:

Well, you know, I guess I'm more geared to looking at what needs to be done than what has been done, but it's gratifying to me, when I see some of the individuals that will come up to me in that department, and now some of them are chief officers, and say that chief, you know, I appreciate you, you're responsible for helping me get this job and do the things. But it's more important to me when I see some of those individuals that are doing stuff for others, you know what I'm saying? It's hard, when I see individuals that are just doing stuff for themselves, you know, and also, when I see some of the clock being turned back in some areas, not just San Francisco, it's all over, because like I said, I still see—that's why I can't rest. I'm still trying to do

things to help out. I still talk with people around the country who are having problems, and trying to strategize with them and suggest things. I can't play golf, it takes a lot of time to play golf. [laughs]

05-01:15:22

Farrell: It does.

05-01:15:25

Demmons: And I don't have a lot of time. I guess that's the good and the bad. And then, like I stated, I think when I retired, that one of the things that was really gratifying to me was when I would go to graduation and like I said, it was not just looking at the diversity in the recruits, but also looking at the diversity in their relatives and loved ones, that would be in the audience, you know? And I think, you know, that was one of the things that I really enjoyed, just to see that, just a cross section of the city, old and some of the young, and their kids there, the older people. I would look and see some of the older people and see the joy in their face, in knowing that they never had the opportunity to do that, but they were looking at their son or daughter or whatever, in that uniform and stuff, and the pride that they had in seeing that. So that's real gratifying. And even more than that, like a lot of times, I'll be in the city and one of the fire engines or trucks or whatever, will stop and I'll speak with them, and all of them, not just the minorities and women, some of the white firefighters, and how warm they are. You can tell when people are genuinely warm, and so that's gratifying, to see that, and to see them working together, even though there are still problems, but to see that, that's real.

05-01:17:31

Farrell: And kind of on that note, what's it meant to you, to see a woman who was initially hired because of your work on the consent decree, rise to the ranks of chief of the department?

05-01:17:50

Demmons: Well, you know, I think I mentioned, at one point, the Black Firefighters, we had no confidence in the department being sincere about trying to bring women and minorities in, so we started our own program. In fact, I told the membership, I said we're going to recruit them, help train them, watch them during their probationary period, all the way though. I don't know if I mentioned it to you, we used to have—we got the use of a middle school in Bayview-Hunters Point, before, and we would break the group up into groups, in the classrooms, and go over reading comprehension and go over math and stuff, that they used to have on the exams. Before that, they would have—before they broke it down into groups, they would all meet in the auditorium. So I would kind of just give them a pep talk and encourage them and talk to them. This one night I was talking, and this woman said something, and I didn't understand, and some guy made some comment and I didn't catch it, but she got up and she left out crying. So I went and caught up with her, to find out what had happened, what was going on, and so she said he made some sexist comment, I found out later, you know, to something that she was

saying. And so she says, "You know, Bob, when I was a little girl, we lived across the street from the fire station," and she said, "That's all I ever wanted to do in my life, was be a firefighter." When she said that, it said to me, okay—and I told you before. I didn't plan on staying in the fire department. Why shouldn't she, if that's her dream and that's what she wants to do with her life, why shouldn't she be given an opportunity to at least prove that she can do it, with a valid process and so forth. That's all, you know, I felt that she should at least have that. It's not saying that she's going to be a firefighter, but she shouldn't be excluded because she's a woman, if that's her dream, because she was going through life. So that sort of, I guess really made me really look at what women were facing, you know, and how, looking at things from their perspective.

So, when I think about all the times before the women came in, how the different people were saying they're not qualified, they can't do the job, and blah-blah-blah-blah-blah, you know all of that, and to see not only Chief Hayes-White rise to be chief, and how gratifying that is, but look at all the other women that are doing things, not only in San Francisco. So, you're breaking it all down, eliminating sort of like—I don't want to get into the politics. It's sort of like talking about Hillary Clinton, you know breaking that glass ceiling. That was obviously—and it's funny, because she'll say, "You know chief, I tell everybody that it's because of you and Mayor Gavin Newsom that I'm the Chief." I say, "Joanne, don't tell people that." Kidding with her. But no, she did it. She did it, because as I said, I was able to—I promoted her to captain, but that was just my role. Her role was proving that she deserved whatever she got, and working hard and doing the things that she needed to do. And as I said, when I put her in different positions and evaluated how she functioned and how she contributed and what she did, then that's why I kept, any opportunity, if I got one, I would move her into another position, because I needed help. I'm one person, I can't run the department by myself, as I've stated before. It's about the people in that department, and that's what I was looking for, people that had that management skill or had that, because the fire department is unique, same with the police, in that everyone comes in at the lower level and all of them come in. It's not like a lot of your professional jobs, where people can come in at all levels, you know? And like I said, some of them don't progress beyond that entry level. The only thing that changes is their uniform and their pay, okay? And to see people that really get it and really try to manage their management skills, display those and stuff. And I notice that several of the people that I put in place were former Marines, because I knew I could depend on them.

05-01:23:40

Farrell:

Yeah.

05-01:23:41

Demmons:

Even though some of them were not what you would call really liking—had a lot of fondness of me being chief, but I knew I could depend on them if I put

them in a job. In fact, one of the individuals, he was the one that I spoke of, when I was trying to be an EMT, that had that thing and tried to tell me it wasn't one. Some of the attitudes I saw there. But the last time I saw him was at a memorial service and when I was walking down the aisle, he jumped up and gave me the biggest hug that I had ever received.

05-01:24:25

Farrell:

And I guess lastly, what are your hopes for the department and the future, or the city of San Francisco?

05-01:24:34

Demmons:

Well, I hope that it reflects and continues to, as best as possible, reflect the makeup of the city diversity-wise, and I hope that every citizen in that city, no matter what race or gender or sexual preference or whatever it is, if they're a member of all the groups that make up that beautiful city, that all of the individuals and all those people in those communities all across the city, have an opportunity, if they so desire, to at least have a fair opportunity to become a firefighter in that department. And I hope that all the firefighters in that department will base their friendship on mutual interests and things like that, not on race or gender or any of the other things, that they will see individuals as individuals and, you know, really understand it. Like I said, one of my favorite songs is "Imagine," I'm sure you've heard that. That's one of my favorites. I play it probably more than I play any other song in my collection, but I hope that that's—you know, that's what I looked at before and that's what I hoped, not only in that fire department, but in that city and everywhere else, and you see, you know—because I think what can happen when people—

Like I say, it was interesting, early on, I stated I worked in the station, where I was the only African American, and at the time it was the largest station in the city and the closest station to where I worked, at one point they had over twenty blacks working in that station, on a different apparatus totally. And one of the firefighters in the station where I was working, came to me one day and he says, "Bob, wouldn't you be more comfortable working down at Station 5?" Which is the station. I said, "I'll tell you how I look at things." I said, "I can come in this station and everybody in this station could assume the identical physical appearance, and within five or ten minutes, I could tell you who's who, even though everybody looked the same." I don't think he got it. He didn't react like he understood what I was saying, you know.

05-01:27:37

Farrell:

Well, do you have anything else that you want to add?

05-01:27:40

Demmons:

No. I just, like I say, I appreciate giving the opportunity to share with whoever, some of my experiences. I definitely hope that sometimes, when you get at the truth, sometimes you don't want to say negative things about individuals, but you know it's kind of like hot and cold. There's no way you

can tell the difference between hot and cold unless you have—if you just feel cold all the time, you won't understand what hot is, and if you're hot all the time, you don't understand what cold is. So if you don't know what bad is, you know, all you know is good, and so you don't understand bad, and vice versa. So that's the thing, and I guess when I became chief and one of the reporters was interviewing me and wanted me to talk about some of my experiences, and at the time I told him that I didn't want to bring those things up, you know, because I had a job of trying to bring people together, and that wouldn't be helpful, if I did that.

But I appreciate the opportunity. I didn't know about the archives. You know, I knew about archives, but I didn't realize that Berkeley had. I should have, and all the places, universities, sure have them. But I hope that again, some of the things that I've shared can be helpful to people that are trying to solve problems.

05-01:29:30

Farrell:

Absolutely, I think so and thank you so much for your time and for sharing your experiences, because I think that there's a lot of lessons that people can learn, and hopefully take cues from you and your leadership. So, thank you so much, I appreciate it.

05-01:29:44

Demmons:

Well, thank you.

[End of Interview]