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Lt. Anne Young was born in Phoenix, Arizona and was raised in San Francisco, California. She first worked in the San Jose Fire Department in her early twenties before applying to the San Francisco Fire Department. She was among the first four females to be hired by the SFFD after the 1986 Consent Decree. She became the first female lieutenant in the department, but was met with relentless discrimination. She eventually retired after taking the department to court. In this interview, she discusses her early childhood, early experiences in a handful of fire departments, the hiring process for the SFFD, fire academy, women working with the Black Firefighters Association for equal treatment, her experiences being openly gay in the department, the challenges of rising through the ranks as a woman, mistreatment by her colleagues, filing a lawsuit against the department for discrimination, her legal battle, her effort to recover after being under constant pressure and scrutiny, her decision to retire from the department, and finally, her reflections on being a part of the SFFD.
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[End of Interview]
Farrell: Okay. This is Shanna Farrell with Lieutenant Anne Young on Friday, October 28, 2016. This is our first session for the San Francisco Fire Department Oral History Project and we are in Pescadero, California. Can you tell me where and when you were born and a little bit about your early life?

Young: I was born on August 6, 1961. Actually, it was almost August 7, 11:57 p.m., in Phoenix, Arizona. My mother had moved down there when she was seven months pregnant, or maybe eight months pregnant, and got off an airplane when it was 114 degrees—because I was born in August, right? So the first year and a half years of my life were spent in Phoenix. She moved me and my three brothers back up to Sacramento probably by 1962-ish. Then by 1963, we were all living in San Francisco. My mother was a single mom, and she had a hard time finding places to rent. We moved a lot in that first five years, mainly living in poorer neighborhoods, predominantly black neighborhoods—the Haight, the Fillmore, the Western Addition. Then she finally found a flat in the Inner Sunset, 4th and Irving in San Francisco, and that’s where I spent a big chunk of childhood. Living in poor neighborhoods, my brothers and I went to schools that were almost all black, and so we were a minority. It was keenly felt, trying to play and learn how to navigate socially. I was kind of awkward and boisterous for a little girl. I was really, for all intents and purposes, not a little girl; I was a little boy in a girl’s body. It’s very clear to me that my identity was more male. So I played rough. I did a lot of things that little girls weren’t supposed to do. I didn’t want to wear dresses. I really didn’t want to wear dresses. I was the last of her six kids, and she’d had two daughters who she was able to have that sort of mother-daughter relationship with, where she made their clothes and it was dress-up. And I was having none of that. She actually went with the flow and supported me in being who I was. When the schools took me on for not wanting to wear dresses—back then, it was right on sort of the cusp of when they could still enact corporeal punishment and they could spank you at school, and they had dress codes for girls—my mom negotiated sort of a truce, where I wore dresses during school and I could wear jeans and a t-shirt during recess.

Because she worked, my brother Andy and I, who I had the closest bond with—we were closest in age; we could’ve been fraternal twins, but he’s fourteen months older than I am—Where was I going with that? Anyway, we spent the morning hours before school and then a good chunk of time after school at the daycare center that was housed in the same building. We were nine-to-five at a school or institution, and then my mom would come pick us up.

Later on in school, we would get on a bus and go home from daycare. And during the summers, we were at daycare, because she worked. But she let me take jeans and t-shirt and socks and sneakers, and every time recess hit, I ran
into the bathroom and changed into these clothes, to run out to the schoolyard and play for—this is when recess was a big part of your school day. It felt like it was worth it to change, and then race back, put the dress on, go to class. Then obviously at daycare, I could wear the jeans and t-shirt. Every day was spent doing that. I drew a lot of attention. I got a lot of teasing. I got beat up at lot at school, just trying to sort of defend myself and just being me and constantly being questioned about my gender. If I was born nowadays, this would be a nonissue. I would be sort of scooped up by the institution of school and taken care of. But back then, it was sort of fend for yourself. I’m not blaming anybody; that’s just the way it was. But my school life was constantly like that, all the way through high school. It toughened me up in a lot of ways. It’s sort of like the “Boy Named Sue,” right? I didn’t have a protector. My brother Andy was not my protector, the teachers were not my protectors. This was true of any of the kids in the school system back then. So you had to sink or swim. I’m smart enough to learn how to navigate that system and stay away from the people that were going to make it harder for me, and assert myself with the people that it would be clear that I wasn’t someone to be trifled with. But most of the time, I just tried to stay to myself. I read a lot. I read a lot.

My mom was very supportive in that. Any creative pursuit that I wanted to try, she was all for it. Although I wanted to learn how to play the drums, she was insistent that I not do that, and so I ended up choosing trumpet. She was very into me knowing how to play a musical instrument and supported that in watching television shows like Lawrence Welk. “Hey, the trumpets are on. Come down the hall, watch the show,” that kind of thing. Taking us to band concerts. She came to every school function that I was in or participated in. So she showed up as best she could for that. But having older brothers that were a lot older and just kind of jerks and asserting themselves, too—I can’t say that I know my brothers that well. My brother Andy, who’s closest to me, I know him better than the other two brothers. But they could be very hard-edged and say things. I once got beat up soundly, [for] using the word “nigger,” because I heard it at home. And I was five. I was five, and I didn’t know. Then I think back on it. It’s hard to be me at five years old and remember what happened, exactly, because time I’ve remembered it, it gets revised in every recalling of it. But I remember the word coming out of my mouth and there being consequences immediately.

I watched my mom deal with the street crime that was really prevalent back then. We did not fit in. We were oddballs in the neighborhood. There weren’t a lot of white people living in the Fillmore at that time. For whatever reason, she continued to carry a purse. Even though she kept all of her money and ID and everything in a glove pinned inside of the hem of her skirt or her pants or whatever, she carried a purse. She was not going to not carry a purse. She got her purse snatched regularly. My brother Andy and I had to run to—we had a drill. So if she got attacked, we ran to opposite ends of the block. Don’t ask me why. I have no idea why, but that’s what we did. I watched her get beat up
for being different. This whole idea of fitting in was just an illusion. Or it was like not something that was going to be accessible to me. But I wanted it. I wanted it really bad.

We were working-class. She had a job with the State of California. She worked for them for forty years. She started out as a file clerk, out of high school. Back then, a high school education—my mom was the class of, what was it, 36?—it was as good as a four-year college degree. She ended her career in 1986 or ’87, just after I got into the fire department, as a legislative analyst, a legal librarian for the insurance division for the State of California. Every bit of legislation crossed her desk, to be reviewed to see how it impacted the insurance company. So she had a brain. She read three newspapers a day, she read books, she watched the news. She had an opinion that was usually pretty well formed by her observations. She remembered politicians. I remember writing her obituary and saying that she had a long memory for public servants’ failings and their successes—how hard they worked, whether they showed up, how they voted. She was a really good voter. Yeah. I wish she was around just so I could ask her about some of the stuff that’s on the ballot now. Really, really, what do you think about this?

She was nearly killed in an incident when I think was six and Andy was seven. We went to the laundromat, just up the street from where we lived, and a woman came in, along with some kids, and she proceeded to pull a large knife out of a bag. She had a baby on her hip. She pulled this knife out of her bag and started swinging it, and she hit this man and then she hit my mother. Both of them went down. There was a lot of blood. My brother Andy ran out the door and ran down the street to our house, to get my brother-in-law, my sister Beth’s husband. I just sat there looking at my mom bleeding. In some ways, the idea that there was this trauma and that there was nothing I could do about it really—the sense of powerlessness I was just shocked into. I don’t even remember how I escaped this woman’s—she went after my brother Andy; he got under the chairs. I just sat there. I was not her target, for whatever reason. That even, in and of itself, could’ve been the pivotal thing for my life. My life could’ve collapsed after that or any number of things. But it’s just this thing that happened. It’s not like I’m trying to find whether it formed anything in it, but in later years, when I was purposely going into traumas, other people’s traumas, as a firefighter and ready to deal with it, I had this sense of what it was like to be in the middle of something like that. It gave me an edge, in a way, and an extra measure of compassion, I believe, because I knew what it was like to be on the other side. We saw a lot of gang violence, as a firefighter. So a lot of retaliatory, a lot of just—it’s not random violence; there’s something that preceded it. But it appears to be. So, until my mom moved us out of those neighborhoods, it was chaotic all the time.
And then there were really rich, food-filled holidays in these little flats. My sister pregnant with my niece; watching television on Sunday nights; walking to Golden Gate Park when we lived on Irving Street, on Sundays; going over to the park, which was really a haven. That completely transformed my childhood, once I had access to that park. My mom relaxed a lot. She grew up in Vallejo, where you could just run amok. Whenever we went to visit my grandparents, that’s what we did. It was like night and day. She wouldn’t let us out of the house in San Francisco. But when we got to Vallejo, oh, yeah, you can on the other side of town, if you want. It was crazy. But that’s how she felt. She knew, or she believed, that it was safe there. It was, for the most part. It was a different kind of childhood, when we left the city. I don’t know, I can’t say I enjoyed it more; it was just noticeably different, freer. So I knew that was a possibility. It was liked I’d learned early on there were rules and you behaved a certain way, and that’s what you did. You didn’t ask questions about money and you didn’t—. We always had food and we were always warm and safe and dry. I never slept outdoors, we weren’t homeless. But did we have money? No. Did I have good clothes? No. I would not wear dresses, so I wore hand-me-downs. I was completely content to wear jeans and t-shirts and sneakers. My brother Andy and I dressed alike. That’s why people thought we were kind of twins. But anyway, I don’t know how much more.

Farrell: The idea of sort of learning that there’s a code and there’s a way to behave, how much of that did you learn in school or throughout your education?

Young: I still believe that I got a good education from the public schools, in terms of science and something that stimulated my curiosity. But what I learned, I couldn’t tell you. I remember my days being centered around knowing what was going to happen next. Growing up in a household that’s chaotic, in a neighborhood that’s chaotic, anywhere I went, it seemed like I was the focus of the chaos. I drew attention to myself being a boyish girl, being a little butch dyke. I knew at six years old that I was different. So whatever I went there to learn was completely immersed in this environment. The idea that I would learn something from any class, that was almost extracurricular. What I did was survive, when I went to school. I tried to figure out ways to comfort myself. I comforted myself in knowing that I could go and get a new book at the library, or knowing that we were going to have recess and my friend was going to be there, or what I was going to have for lunch. Sounds a little pathetic, but I think a lot of kids do this just to survive. The bane of the working class is that you do want to fit in, and money factors really big in appearance. I could not play the part of a little girl, but I wanted to have the boy clothes that I wanted to have as I got older. I wanted to have jeans, I wanted to have Pendleton shirts, I wanted to have a jeans jacket, I wanted to have a certain type of hat. I’ve worn hats all my life. I had a look and I perfected it, and I felt comfortable with that look, no matter how much teasing I got. It didn’t matter; I felt good in that uniform. That’s exactly what it was. I
was drawn to uniforms, dressing a certain way in order to feel like I was me. If I couldn’t be something else, I was going to be fully me. And I did, and I maintained that all through school. It was very much in people’s faces. That was a whole ’nother layer of agitation. It’s one thing to just look different and sort of like submit to the bullying; it’s another to say, go ahead and hit me or go ahead and tease me. I behaved as if it didn’t matter to me. It did. It did.

There were times when I really couldn’t stand it. But then I learned how to tune that out, as well, and that was part of it, is to toughen up and not let something get to you. After a while, I was able to sort through how much of it—some part of me knew that these kids were just as—they had just as screwed-up childhoods as I did. I’m not saying that I would’ve said I had compassion, because I don’t think I was aware of it in terms like that. But I felt more connected. I could tell. You could look at a kid and go, that kid’s got it, too. Like a social disease or something. Even if they were acting like they were big and bad or whatever, you knew that that’s not what was going on. They were acting. We were all acting. It was like I could see behind the scenes. I almost have this disclaimer. I’m not saying I was more smart or whatever. But I was; I was smart. I could see behind some of this stuff, the charades. I could see that we were playing a big game. Some days I could deal with it and some days I didn’t like it. I just wanted to yell at people, why don’t we just stop this and be ourselves?

I had a couple of friends who showed me that you could be yourself and still have a good life. But out of all the people I saw, it was like it was rare that you could be honest or you could say, yeah, I’m scared. By the time I was ten—I don’t even think it was fitting in, but—I got turned onto cigarettes and then pot. This is the seventies, the early ‘70s, so the tail end of the sixties. And alcohol. That was it. Those were the big game changers. They were incredible escapes. There was no turning back. Why would I want to be subjected to a day of bullying and not be high, right? [she laughs] I feel like that’s the smartest thing I did. Because at that point, by the time I got to junior high, the sort of mentoring and, what would you like to do and—I had an older brother that went to Herbert Hoover before me, and he was a badass screw up. I was basically told that I was going to be just as screwed up as he was, by the counselor. Oh, you’re so-and-so’s sister. Yeah. Yeah, you’ll be just like him. I thought, okay, fine. At some point in seventh grade, I cut a class and the world didn’t stop spinning. Pretty soon, the only class I went to was band. Then I would just cut out with my friends. These friends, they were just other kids. One of them actually lived in a group home in San Francisco, so he had a story as well, and he was forthcoming about it. I was really curious about living in a group home, because it sounded ideal. It was not your family, and here are some people that kind of take care of you. You’re not having to watch your back all the time. That’s not entirely true about the foster care and group system, but back then that was the idea. I really didn’t want to live at home.
anymore. I had an older brother that was just a jerk. I didn’t fit in. I was tired of it.

And my mom drank. It was a problem for me when home life was not a sanctuary, not even an escape anymore. If outside in the world was chaotic and you didn’t have a safe place to go, it’s like—so I managed to get myself arrested and into the juvenile justice system and placed in a group home. When I look back on it, it was a plan that I created in my head, and then I manifested it. I figured out how to work the system, what I had to do to get taken out of my home and then placed, and it worked. It worked. I was placed in a group home down in San Jose. My mother didn’t know that I had wanted to be down there. She thought my crimes were what placed me down there. I left home at twelve. I felt completely triumphant in that. It started a whole ‘nother chapter of living in what I would call women’s community. It was a girls’ group home. But again, it’s sort of like figuring out how to fit in. It was a whole new set of rules that I had to learn and a system I had to learn how to be a part of. Anyway. I could just keep talking. You can raise your hand if you’d like me to steer it or—.

Farrell: Oh, no. No problem on my end.

01-00:21:39
Young: Okay.

Farrell: So at that point, with the new chapter and you knowing that you are in control of your destiny, you knew that if this was going to happen, you could make it happen. Did you, at that point, know that there was—you’re twelve at this point, but that there was an end to this, there was an end in sight? Did you know that that was—?

01-00:22:07
Young: That’s a good question. It seemed like I had decided what was going to happen at home and I needed to leave. Here when I landed in the group home, or made myself get into the group home, I didn’t know what was going to happen next. That lent itself to being alive again. But by then I was using—. I was, I was drinking, I was smoking pot. I’m not anti-pot, but I wished at that point, I had stopped smoking pot and started being more creative, or using the school system down in San Jose, or having adults—. I had adults in my life that would have nurtured that, but I stayed in this, I’ve got to fit in with these other girls. Because I had been in juvenile hall for a month, by the time I got to that group home. And juvie is jail; don’t kid yourself. If you think it’s just like a little holding cell, it’s not. There’s hierarchies in there, there are kids that’ll kick your ass, there’s contraband, there’s violence. In that month’s time, I learned that in order to be safe, you had to, again, assert yourself. But nobody was teasing me about being mannish, because there were other girls in there that were just like me. I was like, okay, yeah, I fit in here. I’m fitting into the jail environment, as opposed to school. Once I got back out into the school
system, I got less of that kind of teasing about being mannish. It wasn’t all the
time and it wasn’t from everybody. Then I got friends that I could get high
with, and that was it, as long as I had friends. But it was associated with
getting high, and so that’s what we did. I’m not saying I wasn’t completely
creative, but I didn’t really grow in a lot of ways. I grew in age. But I was just
sort of still savvy of the system, as opposed to who am I, what’s my creative
spark? I think that now. This is all hindsight, obviously. You can’t have that
level of maturity as a kid. If I had really realized that, I could let my guard
down, I think things would’ve been very different for me, in terms of what I
chose to do next.

My mom never talked about college. She never talked about higher education,
because she didn’t have it and she was doing fine. It was, be a civil servant.
She raised us to be civil servants. Get a job with the city or the state or the
federal government, and you’ll be set. You’ll have benefits, you’ll have
vacation, you’ll have sick time. She used to say, and I quote her, “It’ll take
either an incredible act of stupidity or an act of congress to lose your job.”
You’re protected by unions. She was very union-oriented, very labor-oriented.
That’s what I thought, if I thought at all about it. I made it through high school
and I became an emancipated minor at seventeen, and started just taking odd
jobs, and then lived on my own. I made this natural progression to adulthood
and independence. And I enjoyed it. I enjoyed my own company. I wasn’t
afraid to live alone, I wasn’t afraid to sort of scrape by.

But I remember my brother Steve becoming a firefighter in San Francisco, in
1981? No, 1980. He just said, “Why don’t you—? They’re going to—.” I
don’t know why. It’s interesting to me now, when I think about it, that he
encouraged me to apply for the job, given how things turned out. He’s like,
oh, yeah, come in. But he and I had a relationship that sort of—. It was just
this parallel universe. Whenever I was hanging out with Steve, I loved it. I
was absolutely in love with him, as that figure in my life. I don’t know
whether it’s father or big brother or whatever, but he was good. He was the
good in my [life]. I looked forward to seeing him, he taught me things. He
taught me mechanics, we played tennis together. I admired everything he did
at that time. He was a drum player; he had a conga. He surfed, he smoked pot,
he was cool. He was all these things I wanted to be. I don’t know, I wanted to
fit in like him. He played Beatles albums. All of that, right? And here he was
saying, “Yeah, everybody’s going to apply, you might as well.” I think that
was the second year, the second time that they allowed women to apply. They
didn’t allow women to apply until 1978, and I applied in 1980. Yeah, 1980
or ’81. Yeah. But I had also saw an entry-level hiring, a recruitment drive, for
the San Jose Fire Department. I was still living down there. I went and took
their test. I did, again, this sort of foreshadowing. I went and took their test
and I was in line for the pre-test sort of orientation, and I heard these two guys
talking about the study materials they’d gotten. I said, “What study
materials?” He just kind of looked at me like, oh, yeah. These guys had gotten stuff for the written test that the women had not gotten.

I was floored. I was like, where can I get some of those? Oh, you can’t. I got them from a friend. I thought, okay, this is wrong. Just as a work ethic thing; I didn’t even think in terms of gender. I was like, you have some friend? Because I didn’t identify as female, although obviously I was. When I went and took a test, my brain said I was on equal footing with everybody. And my mom raised us to think that way. Take every test you can. Anything that comes your way, take advantage of it, because that’s how civil service works. God knows. Then I started training for the physical test, and we had to go and lift a ladder out of a truck, and they told me to take my shoes off. I said, “Why? Am I going to not have shoes on at a fire?” I just said that. It wasn’t even flippant; it was like, why would I? It was a way to weed out short people. The San Francisco Fire Department did it, at one point. Yeah, barefoot ladder removal thing. It’s bizarre. But yeah.

So here I am, questioning. Why am I taking my shoes off? Why are these—? I was five foot eight, so I was on the taller end of a lot of the women. Even short men were subjected to this. They couldn’t say, we had a height requirement. They wouldn’t say it, right? They had these simulated skill things that you had to learn how to do, in order to take the test. I thought, do you just want to know how strong my arms are or my back, or do you want me to learn how to throw a ladder? My brain told me something wasn’t right from the very beginning. There were other women there and I got into this role of, do you think this is right? They were like, no. We ended up going and getting a lawyer, who came in and said, “Yeah, this is just a wee bit discriminatory and you kind of need to explain this.” The department acquiesced and said, you can retake it again. You can train on the equipment and you can retake the test. In the meantime, they’d had one woman who’d passed without any of this stuff. Already, there’s this separation. That’s the woman they ended up hiring anyway. None of the rest of us made the cut. I think I missed the run by about, I don’t know, five seconds. It was really close. But I had tried. That’s what I did. After that, I thought, there’s way more going on here. I left that whole experience thinking, there’s way more going on here than just going and taking a test. In a way, it was really off-putting. Why would I want to bother doing this stuff? But another part of me was mad. I was mad. Because I was known as a technician, when I went to the gym and lifted weights, I knew exactly the range of motion of my elbow as I was doing a curl, and I was keeping—I was very much into the systematic aspect of it, like how many reps I did, and then how many reps I did the next day, and whether I was growing, and how to eat. All of this stuff, the science of it. And doing it right, so I didn’t hurt myself, and doing it right so it was done right. I could’ve learned anything they’d thrown at me. In fact, I did. When I became a firefighter, I did.
Farrell: Did you have a hard time finding a lawyer in San Jose to take on the case?

01-00:31:58 Young: I don’t remember all the details, but I don’t even think we really hired this person. Maybe we did, because now I’m remembering I worked off some of what I owed her by doing some landscaping at their house. I don’t remember her name; I don’t remember anything other than the fact that she stepped up for us. There may have been three or four other women, too, who were mad about this thing. I don’t remember any of the details of how they found this person at all. But it wasn’t hard. It was harder for me to find an attorney to represent me when I was suing the SFFD when I left. That was a nightmare. But yeah, no. And it was just her, yeah.

Farrell: Do you remember what the process was like once you found her and then you got the San Jose department to acquiesce? If they kind of immediately were like, you know what, you’re right?

01-00:32:59 Young: It happened within a month. All of this stuff happened.

Farrell: Okay. Oh, that’s fast.

01-00:33:02 Young: Yeah, it was very fast. I think they were savvy enough to see that they had kind of screwed up, because they did, they found these sort of training materials that hadn’t been distributed to everybody, and here was a test, and why were you making people take their shoes off? It was like they could see the writing on the wall. But they’d also had a woman pass. Whatever goal they had, they had achieved it. I don’t know how long it took for them to hire more women; I don’t even know how many women are on the San Jose department now. But it was definitely, the department saw it coming. San Francisco was one of the last major metropolitan departments in the country to hire women, okay? 1987. So they held out longer than most of the other departments. I took tests all over the state of California for six years, trying to get hired. So I really put my back to it. Once I took that test and went through that whole process, saw that there was way more going on, then I went up and applied in San Francisco. I took the written test and I made the cut to take the physical. This is where I’m starting to lose my memory. There was already a team kind of assembled of lawyers. The black firefighters had been trying to break in the ranks for a long time, and they were getting nowhere in getting the testing system revamped or updated or validated. They’d already had consent decrees about race and disparity in the ranks. So the San Francisco Fire Department had been stalling and putting off and not doing what they needed to do for a long time. I don’t know whose idea it was for the women and the black firefighters to join ranks, but that’s what we did. The cadre of lawyers and everything broken open at that point. But it took six years from the point at which I took the Fire Department test in San Francisco until when we were hired.
Farrell: Aside from your brother encouraging you, what was it that kept you applying to different places around the state, that attracted you to the fire department?

01-00:35:41 Young: It really changed. The whole idea of having a goal—I remember when I was a kid, I wanted to have things to look forward to. Here was something that completely jelled my life. I quit smoking, I quit drinking, I quit smoking pot, I start running, going to the gym. My life started to get on track. I had this goal. And I was fascinated by it. I had a job right out of high school. I worked at a gas station, which was another sort of ground breaker. I had to cut my hair to get the job. It was a very busy intersection in San Jose, and there were accidents there all the time. We would run out there with a crowbar and first-aid kid and a fire extinguisher. In a way, I was kind of like, okay! I was running towards something other people would be running away from. So I had this spark and this interesting. It certainly meant something that Steve did it, because I totally idolized him. If he’s encouraging me to pursue it, yeah, why not? It never occurred to me that I could do something else with my life or that I had options. I was this sort of thrill seeker, bent on doing it right, wanting to learn how to do it the best way, and here was something that embodied all those things. So why not? I’ll just go for it.

I had a girlfriend later on who said, “Had you ever thought about maybe being a doctor?” I have the level of intelligence to handle graduate school. I could’ve gone on and done these—it was like, why? Here’s the working-class thing. Why would I want to do something more, when I could have a good, benefits, da-da-da-da-? I had very high standards for myself, but I didn’t have high expectations. So here was something that consumed me, and I wanted that. Go to the gym. There weren’t a lot of women being hired, there weren’t a lot of women in departments. There was this band of us that took tests and worked out at the gym. There was a group that had taken the San Francisco test, and we started training together. So it was this little club that we formed, of women who were a cut above. It’s sort of elitist, in a way, in a puny kind of elitist way. We just loved living for that. I made friends, I lived in the city, I had a softball team I played on. I was very much steeped in the lesbian culture and community, so I had this other life, as well. But being a firefighter within that, you were—it would be like being an astronaut, right? You were seen as almost god-like. It’s very hard to turn away from that kind of attention. I’m a Leo, so it was part and parcel. It was like feeling like I wasn’t getting picked on anymore. I had things that people openly admired. It was the opposite of my childhood. So yeah, I pursued that. I loved being fit and strong. I loved how it felt to be in my body, running. It was amazing to me.

Farrell: Before those six years between taking the first test and then being, I guess, part of the first four female class that was accepted, why did you decide to focus your efforts on San Francisco, versus maybe San Jose?
I probably took San Jose’s test again. You have to get past the oral interview. So the first couple times I took tests, I didn’t pass the physicals. Then I put my back to it and I learned. The more you do it, the better you can get. They were systems. It was a game. I started passing tests. I started progressing from the written to the physical, and now the oral interview. Now, you’ve just done all this stuff, you’re filthy dirty, and you’ve got to go dress up in a skirt suit and go and sit in front of a panel of men. There was no standardization whatsoever of questions or anything. They could ask you anything they wanted. They had me doing pushups in front of them, they had me telling them about my workouts, asking me personal questions. It was like I didn’t know any better. They didn’t subject the men to this. It was almost like open ridicule, at times. They were not very professional, let’s just say that. But I took tests in the east—Stockton, Concord, Castro Valley, Eden Valley, Hayward, Daly City. I ended up being hired by Daly City. Yeah. I was a firefighter there first. They hired in ’86. Me and a woman were the first two in that department. Then I got job offers from two other cities. Santa Clara was a pain-in-the-ass test. San Diego. I had a plane ticket to go to Madison, Wisconsin. I knew women firefighters there and they had arranged for me to take the written and physical in the same day, so that I could fly in, do this. Because they were recruiting. They had a fabulous recruitment program, and they mentored and worked with their women. God, it was night and day. Why wouldn’t I want to go there?

But a week before I was supposed to go, I got in a motorcycle accident and yeah, broke my wrist, and that was it. It was something to do. It was a focus for my life. At the same time, trying to have a life that was full of other things. But I was pretty obsessed with the fire department. San Francisco, it was like the pinnacle. I began to realize that this was huge. The more I studied the test itself—I have the kind of inquiring mind of like, well, yeah, if I’ve seen this already, that this is a game, what kind of a game are they playing? I saw that some of their tests, their physical tests, were just absolutely absurd. They were absolutely intended to weed people out. I thought it was wrong. I terms of justice, I thought it was just flat out wrong. I didn’t know anything about the black firefighters until really not that long before.

They started holding free training. When they said they were going to redo the physical test and allow us to take it again and create a separate list—this is now, independent of this, all the legal stuff, where the Justice Department’s saying, you have been given X number of years to validate your tests and you have refused to do it—not that you’ve tried and failed, but you’ve refused to do it—you’ve given us no choice. Now they stepped in, and that’s when all of the consent decree and everything [happened]. They said, “You’re going to have parallel hiring. You’re going to have quotas. You’re going to have all of this stuff to address this adverse impact.” Here was a whole ’nother knowledge base that piqued my curiosity and I became obsessed with. I got a real hands-on, from-the-ground-up education about adverse impact and
affirmative action. I could sit and tell any reporter exactly what was going on. Which again, this girlfriend saying, “Well, have you ever thought of being a lawyer? Why would you want to do this dirty job, when you could go and—.” Anyway.

Farrell: When you got hired in Daly City in 1986, can you tell me a little bit about your experience working in that department?

Young: Small town. They used to call Daly City the farm club for San Francisco. There were a lot of ex-Daly City firefighters. In fact, I went to a retirement banquet for somebody in Daly City. I was working for San Francisco at the time, and we all went back down to this retirement banquet. I thought it was interesting that I went, but it’s because I’d worked for a year and a half in Daly City. There was a regional academy. It was like all these departments, to save money, sent their two or three cadets to this academy. So you had four or five departments represented, and maybe thirty candidates going through. It was held in San Mateo, I think. It was not that much different than what San Francisco was going to be. There were some candidates that were assholes—there was me and this other woman from Daly City. There were no other women. It was just harassment, hazing, all of that stuff. Give me twenty push-ups. But Daly City was a smaller department. By the time I’d worked in every station, I’d worked with everybody in the department. There were seventy-five employees. It wasn’t hard to work with everybody. So you had a chance. Back then, I didn’t have a reputation. I was kind of tough-nosed and I felt I had thick skin. I didn’t feel like anybody treated me in a way like, oh, I’m not even going to deal with you; I don’t even want to get to know you. Everybody there was like, okay, show me who you are. I got the same shot that everybody else did. And I won people over. It was a great experience for me to have, prior to going to San Francisco, because I believed what my mother told me, that my work ethic will determine my worth in the workplace. So I honed it. I took everything really seriously and did it to the best of my ability. In some ways, some of the guys felt showed up. Especially stupid stuff like cleaning the firehouse. This happened in San Francisco, too. I was a janitor for the public libraries all the pre-fire time, that six years. That’s what I did. I went to City College and got a degree in fire science and I worked as a janitor. Became an EMT, worked for an ambulance company. My starting salary as a firefighter was like $35,000 a year or more. Back then, that was a lot of money. Paid vacation. I’m going to clean the hell out of that toilet. Or the urinals. I’m just going to scrub this place, because damn, I’m making a ton of money and I’m only here for twenty-four hours. I have a new car sitting outside. I was happy. I was happy. They were like, hey, just calm down a bit, but the place was filthy. These guys don’t care. It was like a frat house a lot of time, instead of a workplace.

But I didn’t care, I was happy. I had a great captain and engineer, the last house that I worked at in Daly City. I just loved it. They were friendly and
engaging and mentors, true mentors. In a way, I was torn. Because here I was a part of this litigation, I was a named plaintiff, and it was like I couldn’t back out. I had to go and be one of the first women in San Francisco. I knew that it was going to be a big deal. I just pumped it up and said what a good thing I’d be doing. That was sort of the beginning of the end. I was safe in Daly City. I think I would have achieved potential. But it was a small town. They didn’t have the same number of fires, like it didn’t count or something, and that was just bullshit. It counted. It absolutely counted. But going up to the city meant I was truly breaking ground. I was going to fight fire. I was going to be something. Always, that was the prize you had your eye on. Always.

Farrell: Initially, when the litigation was happening, I guess prior to 1987, it was the Black Firefighters Association who approached you?

Young: I don’t remember.

Farrell: Okay.

Young: I remember meeting Bob [Robert Demmons] and a fellow named Mike Cotton, at a community center in I think it was the Western Addition—it was a large cultural center; I don’t remember where it was; anyway—for the first time. They were doing a pre-training for the retest. There were black women that were going to be taking it. There were black men that came and trained there, as well. So they’re suddenly like, yeah, welcome aboard. But I don’t know what led to that. Then slowly, I met the lawyers. It wasn’t right away. It was, yeah, just come and work out here and train on the equipment. So that’s what I did.

Farrell: Did you feel like you were supported or accepted by that group of people?

Young: Mm-hm, yeah. Yeah, absolutely. Yeah. It was the first time I’d met—. That’s not true. I know, in the six years that I took tests all over the place, you see the same faces, and so you get to know people.

Farrell: Okay.

Young: There were guys like, hey, how’d you do on Santa Clara’s test? Or, oh, hey, this one’s coming up. We were kind of in it together. That’s sort of how it’s supposed to work, especially in a paramilitary organization. The military has it down. You go in as a recruit and they strip you of your identity, and you bond with all the other recruits to hate the CO or your drill sergeant, and you’re unified. Paramilitary, you get to go home and night and watch TV or read the newspaper, and they can’t quite take everything out of you. But you’re meant to swallow the party line and do things their way. That’s the
only way to do it. If the men in my recruit classes saw that they had to make a choice—some of them saw it; some of them had already made it—some of them weren’t that comfortable with it. But the black firefighters? In later years, I had problems with some of the black men.

I was part of the Black Firefighters Association. I was their recording secretary for a number of years. I aligned with them politically and my career, definitely. But I used to say some were men first and black second. They aligned by that drive. I don’t know what it was like to be a black man. I could never speak to that. But I do know what it’s like to want to fit in and to do whatever it takes to fit in. I think everybody there who was not a white man had to have a coping strategy and had to figure it out. I saw amazing things. Men that had worked together for decades, and one happened to be Hispanic—Every day he came to work—I worked on the same shift with him—he was berated by his best friend and called “beaner” and “spic” and made fun of for his ethnicity, and he just took it and, ha-ha-ha. The day that they brought in a probationary firefighter who was Hispanic—and I’m talking Spanish-speaking Hispanic, one of the people that I helped recruit—that guy did not want to be called “spic” or “beaner” in front of this kid. He made it clear to the guy that those days were over. It was a matter of pride, at that point. I don’t think his counterpart understood. It’s like, what’s different about today? He expected to start doing that to this kid. So these black men that I trained with in the beginning were supported. We were all going to be changed and we were all going to be asked to make that choice. The women, for sure.

The women that I trained with, some of them, once they got their jobs, they just folded right in. They wanted nothing to do—. They wouldn’t speak to the press, they wouldn’t even be aligned with women firefighters. The day of my graduation—this is a historic moment. I have photographs of Mayor [Dianne] Feinstein at the time coming to speak at our graduation ceremony. Television cameras focused on me and the other women recruits. I had invited all of these women firefighters from other departments to come in uniform to support us, and they came. These other women in my department, the three others—Mary Carter, Frances Boyle at the time, and Eileen McCrystal—none of them would come and have their picture with all the other women firefighters. That was it. I knew immediately that they had made their choice.

Farrell: Do you think it’s because they had worked so hard to get there that they felt if they did something not in an institutionalized way, that it was threatening their positions there?

01-00:53:45 Young: Oh, absolutely. Whether they worked hard or not is another thing. I realized how tenuous our positions were in that fire college. We had so much focus on us nobody was going to be bumped out. We were all going to make it; that was really clear. Class after us, no. It was like nobody’s looking at the next
class. From that point on, women were routinely gotten rid of for things that were absolutely discriminatory. It was pattern and practice that built up, and it went on for years. This woman that I was talking about earlier, that was her experience. She was in the second class. She and a black woman were targeted and gotten rid of. Yeah. But two of the women in my class, they couldn’t do pushups. If they had been subjected to the same treatment that the women in the class after us [were], they would’ve been flunked out. The women in the class after me were made to repeat the same motions with the same ladders over and over again until they were exhausted. They did it to the men, as well. I never, ever have said I’m stronger than a man. I’ve never claimed that and I never will. It’s stupid. Relative to me, I have strengths and weaknesses, and that’s true of the men. But if you put us up against one another in a physical test, and you pull the kind of stuff where you’re throwing the same ladder and over and over and over again, you run the risk of injury, and more often than not, you’re going to give out. And that’s what happened. They could’ve gotten rid of any of us from that first class.

Farrell: It was historic moment and Dianne Feinstein was there and you’ve worked so hard and you’re here. This is the eyes on the prize; you’re here. What did that mean to you, that ceremony? Then also having other women from other departments there to support you?

Young: In the six years that it took me to get to that day, I had acquired a community of women firefighters. I had learned to train with them and trust, because that wasn’t accessible to me anywhere else. I couldn’t go to a San Francisco firehouse and ask these guys to teach me the job. I don’t know that they wouldn’t have, but it didn’t feel like that was something that I could do. In the course of going to City College and getting the degree in fire science, I was asked to go interview firefighters for other reasons. But that was about school. It wasn’t about me personally. So here I had this community of women. I had this support that I’d created, this network, this framework. I felt strong being there. I don’t think those other women in my class felt that. I felt like they’d always had this element of—they probably knew more about the inner workings of how much these guys hated us than I did. I blocked it out. But I’m sure they heard plenty of stuff. They grew up in families that were part of San Francisco, in a way that I wasn’t, either. Kind of like Joanne Hayes-White’s life. I’m sure she knew what was going on in those firehouses way more than I did.

My brother was not forthcoming about—he never said, hey, you’re going to have to watch your back or anything like that. No. He was like, yeah, do it. So we were in very different positions politically. I had already aligned myself with, “I’m strong and I’m capable and I’m coming in. I’m coming in with the assumption that I’ll get a shot.” I don’t think these other women thought that. I don’t think they played it safe because they didn’t think they could do it; they played it safe because they really wanted to lessen the blow. It’s sort of like,
hm, all the toughening I’d had being bullied, I doubt that they’d ever experienced like that. I can’t swear to it, but they didn’t behave that way. They knew how to submit, and I knew how to deflect. They were absolutely trying to become invisible.

Farrell:

Two different survival techniques

01-00:58:10

Young:

Two different survival techniques. And I knew from having talked to other women that I could not judge their coping, their survival strategies, that everybody had to—at that point in time, we were all kind of in it together and figuring out how to survive. But I was coming there to work and have a good time. I’d had this in Daly City. In a way, I was kind of handicapped. I remember within I don’t know how long it was, Mary Carter, one of my classmates, said she wanted to get together and talk with me. She said that she was speaking for everybody else. They just wanted me to not be so—I don’t know what. Militant? They had all these adjectives, like I’m somehow too aggressive, too in-your-face, too dogmatic about how to be, how I wanted to be. But I extended these standards to other people. I didn’t tell people what to do, but by cleaning that bathroom or throwing that ladder or doing it this certain way, I was showing that—the people that weren’t doing their job well were glaring. Let’s just say that. That was more of an eye-opener. That was the first thing I saw that was shocking to me, not harassment against me, but just the sloth and the lack of work ethic some of these guys had, and the amount of drinking. I was shocked. I was like, okay, how does this function?

I remember the day Bob—I don’t know how new I was, but I don’t think that I was a lieutenant yet. We were standing down in headquarters. This is when it was still the old building and they had the granite wall with all the names of the firefighters that had been killed in the line of duty. He started pointing out names. He says, “He was drunk, he was drunk, he was drunk.” How many men on that wall had been [drunk]? The reason they were dead was because they were drunk at a fire. Okay. I thought, what is this? This isn’t an elite club. This is like a niche, a civil-service niche. Now, there were plenty of people in there who took the job seriously. There were officers that I saw had that gleam. But drills and everything, it was sort of like lip service. They were dialing it in. This is why it was really hard when I became an officer and I started making them drill. I was like, no, I really want the bathroom clean. No, you can’t just leave the firehouse and come back four hours later. Right. Right. Whatever. I didn’t have the luxury of building up personal relationships. Now, I can’t say that I got that luxury as a firefighter. These women went into the firehouse, and maybe they had established contacts, maybe they were able to connect with these men in a way I never would be able to. They were straight women, too. I think that made a big difference. I don’t know.
Mary Carter cooked for these guys. That’s what she set her back to. She won them over through their stomachs. I don’t know what Eileen did. Frances was foul-mouthed. She had no problem telling people to suck her dick. It carried over. She was also a bigger woman than I was. So they were different personas. Did any of those things work? No, they got harassed. They got harassed, absolutely. So whether we could fit in, whether we were going to be supported, it was a moment-to-moment equation. One of my mentors, and someone I admired greatly, who worked for Oakland, a woman there, she got a thirty-year career. She outlived us all, basically. For her, it was perfect, because she was exactly the kind of person you’d want to work with. She was the kind of person you’d want to have in a bad situation. But she always said, “I know that this could change in an instant. I know that they could turn on me in a moment. I will never forget that or take it for granted.” It was true. She had her own way of getting things done and getting things out in the open, and she stood toe to toe with these guys. But she didn’t file any charges against people. She didn’t do that kind of stuff. She just maneuvered and consciousness-raised, and she didn’t put up with shit, and they respected her. And she went to fires. She established herself in that way. But if she had done anything even remotely like filing charges, it could’ve all been different. I don’t even know where this question started, but the whole idea of being supported, I can look back on it now and it was all a moment in time.

Farrell: You said at the graduation ceremony, there were reporters there. I guess how did you feel like the reporters were portraying this historic moment?

Young: It was phenomenal. They wanted to know what we thought. They wanted to know what this meant. They didn’t ask questions that were like, so the department’s really screwed up and sexist; what do you think about that? They asked, “How do you feel right now?” I told them that I felt fabulous. That’s my brother’s graduation [shows a photograph]. This whole idea that I had taken a job from somebody—now, the day that we graduated, there were white men picketing out in the street, saying that we had taken jobs from them, because there was a quota system. All this stuff. That’s me. Right? Here’s the camera. Okay?

Farrell: Oh. Right there.

Young: Right there. Yeah. yeah.

Farrell: Inches away from you.

Young: Inches away. That’s my mom. She came to visit, for lunch. I stood there and they just formed a line and I said, “Yeah. Yeah. I feel great. I don’t feel like I took anything. I feel like I earned this,” quote/unquote. “This is a fabulous day. I’ve achieved this huge goal.” I didn’t focus on the fact that I was a
woman. I didn’t need to. I had made it through. I look back, and anybody could go and say, oh, they let you graduate. You know what? That could very well be true. I didn’t have a single demerit. Not one. I was the only one who made it through the entire fire college without any demerits. I’d been a firefighter before I went in, I knew the rules, I knew the game, I did everything to the T, I was strong. I could drop and do twenty pushups. I could do fifteen, twenty chin-ups. I was really, really strong. These other women, not so much. And they were overweight. I’m not knocking that, but it was like, any number of us. These guys. We had one guy that was so overweight. It was like, how are you even here? He was afraid of heights. Nobody was going to get booted out of that first class. Nobody. Because everybody was—they made us wear—and I don’t have any pictures of that—they departed from what they normally did, which were jumpsuits, and made us wear these pants and light blue shirts, with a badge, which is unheard of. But they dolled us up to make us look special, because here were four women coming to the fire college, and the fire department was going to do it right. It was crazy. It made no sense. Does that answer your question?

Farrell: It does, yeah. These photos, I think these are—.

Young: I mean, this is the moment it started. This is when I became the target. I set myself apart. I didn’t see anything wrong with this. Now, if I had Bob nearby saying, “Hey, come on over here,” or anybody else saying, “You know what? You don’t have to be the—.” Because it was obvious I was the only one talking. After a while, I was the only person they were interviewing. They talked to a couple of guys and it was like, oh, hey, there’s a woman over there. Yeah. Yeah, it was serious.

Farrell: These are quite telling.

Young: Yeah.

Farrell: So I guess after this, when you’re starting your probationary period and you’re at Engine 13, can you tell me about, I guess, what your probationary period was like, learning the dynamics of the station? You worked so hard to get here; here you are.

Young: I had a leg up. I’d already been in a firehouse. I’d slid down a pole, I knew how to wake up in the middle of the night, get my gear on. I was happy in that moment. I was happy at Station 13. The guys did kid with me. I was never looking for problems. I was never trying to find something. I was there to fit in and do a job. And because you can do a lot more work at a busy house, you don’t have time to sit around and think about things. But the guys were constantly sussing me out. There was a great fellow there, Carl Beck. One of the first fires we went to—that’s Carl [shows photograph from a fire]. I can’t
remember his name. There were a bunch of other guys in this photo, and I just cut the photo because I didn’t care about them. But I could’ve learned a lot from him. I remember the first time we went to a fire and I had to throw the Gleason valve, which is ninety pounds of brass, all right? The Gleason valve is a high-pressure reducing valve, because we have two types of water supply in San Francisco, low-pressure and high-pressure. The high-pressure system is obviously for big-ticket fires. Or it’s a supply line; it’s available. But in order to access that water, you’ve got to put this valve on there. Throwing that valve on there is a technique, and we practice it at the Black Firefighters thing, and it was part of the test. I knew how to do that thing. I was good at it. Ninety pounds? I didn’t care. I knew exactly how to get it onto the hydrant. But when I did it at a fire and they all saw that, they came up and pinched my arms. I said, “What do you think I was doing at fire college the whole time?”

It was like they were astounded that I actually did it. I felt like I was making inroads. I was actually showing them that I could do the job. The captain I had, he was good natured and he could take a joke and I liked him, and I didn’t feel like there was a cloud hanging over me. I felt like I really had a chance there. There was an incident. I don’t want to jump ahead too much to the lawsuit. But the whole idea that every single moment I had in the firehouse was hell, it’s not true. I was made to portray it that way, for the sake of the lawsuit. My lawyer convinced me that unless I made it all sound awful, I wasn’t going to win. And I hated that. It killed me to have to make it sound—I didn’t say things, as opposed to making other people. It’s not like I made up stuff about guys, but the stuff that happened, that should never have been brought up, that I never filed complaints about, but yet had happened. This thing at the dinner table, where there was a firefighter who had to go downtown and didn’t have any clean pants, and he and I were the same size—he was not a big guy—I loaned him some pants. He went down, he came back, he gave them to me. Somebody yelled, “Hey, you’re the first guy to get into Anne’s pants.” Ha, ha, ha. It was funny, okay? It was a laid-out joke and it was like, okay, fine. And they all knew I was gay. I laughed, which maybe I shouldn’t have. I don’t know. But I didn’t see it as a problem. If I had been straight, right?

So here’s the problem, here’s the pressure I was under. You talk about having to make a choice every single day I went to work—at some point, I had to choose to represent every woman, represent every queer. It’s like if I took anything, I was making it harder for the person coming in after me. That is not the choice I wanted to have to make. I wanted to have my own career. Right or wrong. I never badmouthed people, I never laughed along at racist jokes. If they were jokes about me, I needed to have them just be about me. But at some point, I wasn’t allowed that. I had to set the tone.

Promoting was the huge jumping off point, because [Station] 13 was great. I got a lot done, I passed my pump test. I was a good firefighter. I felt that I was
a good firefighter. I made it through fire college; I wasn’t going to be subjected to anything out in the firehouse that somebody wasn’t going to be there with me, and I felt that. Everybody has their moments, even the biggest, strongest guy. I remember a fire one time where there was an attic space. I was the only one small enough to get up in there. But they wanted to choose a guy. They chose this guy who was in my class, who’s immense. He just looked at me like, “This is fucking ridiculous, why they’re making me do this, when you obviously are the better choice.” Just because he’s a guy. I saw that. It didn’t play out well for him, because he couldn’t fit in there. “I’m not going in there.” That kind of thing. But that’s small peanuts, compared to the black men, who I knew had excrement put in their boots, had their safety gear tampered with. They came off of rigs. I had heard these stories going in, and I kept my eye open. I didn’t ever let my guard down about stuff like that. I checked my gear. I didn’t leave it to anybody else. I didn’t put my safety in someone else’s hands, to a point. A lot of stuff, you can’t predict. I’m not going to say that I could make everything safe. But I was keenly aware of that. In some ways, it kind of poisoned the well for me, for me to go in and not be able to look at somebody at face value and get to know them. Bob told me who the bad actors were, in who I worked with. “Look out for this guy, look out for that guy.” He meant well. But I had a good experience with somebody he absolutely hated. Why? I don’t know. Was the guy playing me? I don’t know. I got paid complements but I don’t think it was just bullshit, because it wasn’t intended for other people to hear. “You’re a good driver, Anne. Yeah. No, you can’t pass by something that needs to be done and just leave it undone. You’ve got a good work ethic. Good job.” It was watered down, because I knew this thing about these people. They were racist. They were bigots. Were they sexist? Probably. But could I win them over because I was white? Maybe.

There was a constant battle of divide and conquer, which is absolutely the oldest, oldest tool in the book to oppress. If there was a concerted effort, where they all had the same playbook, and today you have Anne in the firehouse and today you have Bob in the firehouse, and here’s how you’re all going to behave, I could never say that that was true. But did they have a playbook? Yes. They all know how to make somebody miserable. We were made miserable at some point. Everybody got hazed. But to harass is just a slight step over the line. You can’t work in a blue-collar job and not know how to jack people up. Very few were the people that got by just minding their business. Some men were respected for that. They were seen as quiet or whatever. You had to know how to defend yourself and you had to know how to take a punch and you had to know how to throw one. That was it.

Farrell: You mentioned that you don’t remember when you met Bob Demmons. But can you tell me a little bit about, I guess, working with him and how your professional relationship with him developed?
Young: Well, I met him when he was a lieutenant. I don’t remember the conversations, but I just remember enthusiasm on his part. Like, how can I help you? He’s exuberant. He’s a very energetic person. And I hadn’t seen that. That was the first time I’d met anybody like that, any black person like that. I had my own level of, well, sexism and racism. I’d watched my mother get hit over the head a number of times by black people. I was wary. Black men were dangerous. I would never have said that, but those are the instructions, that’s the coding that you get as a white person. Especially one who’s witnessed violence at the hands of black people. So here was this guy being nice to me, and he was really enthusiastic. It was like, okay, okay, all right, I’m going to believe this. I made a choice. Okay, yeah. This guy is okay. I don’t know when I started in on planning or when we started talking, but I had ideas of my own. I probably told him about the San Jose experience, and he went, “Yep.” He started telling me about the lawsuit and the changes that were happening in the department, and they needed people—. He probably was the one who asked me to sign on. Mary Carter was a named plaintiff, as well. She regrets it deeply. Her name’s on that legal document to integrate the fire department. There were a number of other women on there. But they needed people to sign this. I said, “Okay.”

How we ended up doing more than just the fire department stuff was once I graduated—I don’t remember him being a day-to-day experience, but suddenly he was. I had a membership in the IAFF [International Association of Fire Fighters], the local down in Daly City. I was a member of the Service Employees [International] Union when I was a janitor. I was always a member of a union. So I transferred my fire union membership up to 798, which is the San Francisco local. Of course, I was going to be a union member. It’s not a closed shop, though. So there was the Black Firefighters Association. Of course, I was going to find out what they were about. If I had a friendship with Bob, that was part and parcel to it. But I was a union member. Then I started getting the 798 union newsletter and I started seeing the letters saying, “Here’s this donation to fight affirmative action. Kick their asses.” They were accepting money to fight the thing that got us in. I remember talking to the union guys saying, “Don’t you think this is just a little disturbing? That you’re taking my union dues and part of it’s going to pay for the lawyers that are defending your bad behavior?” I started questioning this. That didn’t go over well. I said, “You’re really going to force my hand here. I’m going to resign from this union, because I will not pay to fight affirmative action. You’re forcing me to do this.” The idea of fighting with—here’s a whole separate department, the union. There’s the union and there’s the fire department. I’m going to spend my time fighting these guys that wasn’t a closed shop? I thought it was a bigger statement to resign and put all my political efforts into the Black Firefighters Association. So that’s what I did.

It was a big deal. They were really upset. They made several attempts to get me to reinstate. They made my brother Steve call me on the phone and try to
talk me into rejoining, badger me about why I’d resigned. That was sort of a falling out that we had. I remember the conversation.

The fact that I was associated with Bob Demmons at that point and people saw us as working together to integrate the department, that we were aligned politically, it was visible to everybody. It wasn’t secret anymore. I was going to meetings. I was sitting in on meetings with the lawyers, at that point. I would go to the firehouse and I would work, and then the next day, I would sit at a table with chiefs. I could articulate the culture of the fire department and how the systems worked, everything about how that department worked, because that’s what you did to get a job. You had to know how a fire department functioned. When I sat in on all those oral interviews to get hired, I did research on all the departments that I was interviewing for. I could tell them how many employees they had, what their target hazards were, their budgets, the jobs of their chiefs and firefighters, what a typical shift looked like. So I could do that about the San Francisco department, all right? So I’m sitting there, and they would try to pull some shenanigan about, oh, that’s now how we do it. I’d go, [she whispers] “That is not how they do it. No, this is in fact—.” Oh, man, it didn’t go—. That was another point at which they could’ve said, you don’t have to be at these meetings; you can be in the background and we can get you to look at something and give us your feedback, but you don’t have to be visible. I think it would’ve helped if Bob and the lawyers had said, listen, this puts you at risk. But they saw that it strengthened their case. I was still strong and active and—. I don’t know. But it was draining. It was very stressful, very, very stressful. Bob and I, pretty soon it was strategizing and planning things. I was like his right-hand man, kind of. Now, I don’t know if he would’ve said it that way, but it felt like that. If something was going to happen, we talked about it. I think he believed? I wasn’t just a figure. There’s a lot of clout in having a white person, a white woman, politically active in the Black Firefighters, like there’s an integration there and like it gave them some sort of credibility; it wasn’t just black people. I don’t know if that’s true, but some of it felt like that, like the figurehead. But I believed he saw me as an equal in strategizing, that I had ideas and the ability to integrate what I knew into a practice, how to actually achieve a goal. Getting in the Pride Parade is a very, very good example of that. I’ll show you a picture here. This is the first parade that we were in. That’s Bob.

Oh, yeah.

There’s Jimmy [James] Dunson, James Outley, all right? So here are these three black men and me with this Black Firefighters banner. We had Vic [Victoria] Hayden, who was an out lesbian, driving a brand new rig, and I was driving the parade rig, and the black firefighters were walking between the rigs. Bob was the captain in her rig, right? The officer. White woman, black
man, in a brand new rig; me and Sharon Bretz, in the parade rig, right? Okay? I’m trying to find it. This was insane. The amount of people, okay?

Farrell: Oh, wow. That’s a great photo

01-01:23:59
Young: Yeah.

Farrell: You can see it right from your perspective in that.

01-01:24:01
Young: Yeah. There was another one here. It was a great rig, too. My leg hurt from double clutching. I’m just trying to find that one of Vic. But the point is, is that no one had seen anything like this. These are all the people lining the street. They were like, holy shit, the fire department is in the Pride Parade. Oh my God, there are black men marching on behalf of the fire department. This was unheard of. They started chanting. These guys had no idea what they were getting into. They stood up and they aligned with the gay community politically in that moment. They’re straight men, straight black men. There’s intense pressure on black men to not be gay, right? Here they are marching along, and people on the sidelines are yelling, “Hey-hey, ho-ho, racism has got to go. Hey-hay, ho-ho.” These guys were crying. This was so powerful. We’re walking down Market Street. This is when the parade used to start at Castro and work its way all the way down to the Ferry Plaza or Civic Center. People went nuts. But this wouldn’t have happened if I hadn’t stayed in the background and had Sharon Bretz. I called her up and I said, “Do you want to be in the Pride Parade?” She said, “Yeah.” I said, “Well, here’s what we’ve got to do.” The department tried every which way they could to get out of it. They said, “We don’t have a rig.” I said, “Oh, no. There’s a rig here.” I fed her information. They didn’t know that she was talking to me, but she would suddenly show up and go—she was a badass. She was not going to take no for an answer. She’d get in their face and say, “I happen to know you have a brand new rig down at the,” fa-na-na-na-na. “How about that parade rig? The parade rig that you used in the St. Patrick’s Day parade last month. Or how about Cinco de Mayo?” And the procedures. I knew all this stuff. So between the two of us, it happened. I will never, ever forget that day.

Farrell: When you were trying to organize that, who were you talking to in the administr[ation]? Or what level in the administration?

01-01:26:18
Young: She’s a fire commissioner.

Farrell: Okay. All right, so you were trying to get the permission.

01-01:26:21
Young: Yeah. She’s a fire commissioner and she has direct access to the chief.
Okay. Okay. And it would’ve been the chief. Okay, all right.

Uh-huh, uh-huh. And the fire commission, which would support this. Of course, Bob was there, too. But he was not the person that was navigating her. She was the person. She had insider knowledge, basically, that I provided, because I knew the system and I could call and find out, or look for it, or knew. Now, I was still on probation. All right? But there was no way I was going to miss the Pride Parade.

This was around 1988?

This is ’88.

Okay. My outline said ’98 and that didn’t seem right.

’88.

Okay. So you’re still on probation. When you were doing this, were you concerned about still being on probation?

No. For whatever reason, it’s sort of—. I could say it’s being naïve. I could say it was a form of that. Of course, I can at least ask. What are they going to deny me this? If I was the golden child, if I was untouchable for whatever reason, okay, let’s take advantage of it. I wanted this. I wanted it wholeheartedly. There was a women’s fire conference in Seattle. I was still in the fire college. I said I wanted to fly up there for the weekend. I said, “Is there any way I can take my test earlier so I can catch a flight?” I just asked. They made it happen. I was able to finish my Friday, go get on a plane, fly up to Seattle. It was the second Women in the Fire Service conference ever. The first one was in Madison; this was the second one, in Seattle. I showed up there and I was still in fire college. But see, I’d been a firefighter in Daly City, so I felt like I had time under my belt. I felt like I was established in a way that other women weren’t. Let’s just say I had hutzpah. All they can say is no. Right? So going to the Pride Parade? Absolutely. It was a dream. I remember my first Dykes on Bikes experience in the Pride Parade. A treasured memory. This far surpassed that. Then years after, right? Okay? This is the Pride Parade like six years after, okay? Lookit, there’s gay men. Right? Of course, we’re going to have rigs in the parade. Of course, we’re going to do this every year. They don’t do it anymore. Once I left, that was it. Kai Ali is sitting there [shows photo]. She wasn’t even an officer. I put my helmet on her. Yeah.

Did you find that after this happened, that people were a little bit more open about being gay? Or not really?
I ran the recruitment for the fire department, at some point. Bob asked me to do that. Chief [Joseph] Medina. He was the first chief to ride in the parade, all right? Okay? This is absolutely—I take credit for this. I organized it every year. I’d put out the word of mouth. Then pretty soon we had it on the teletype, “Anybody wanting to be in the Pride Parade, contact Lieutenant Young.” Okay? So yeah. I felt really good about that. And people came out. Oh, this was at the March on Washington, ’93. Whether they were out in the station, whether they—they were named. I mean they were photographed. Where the parade made a turn was by a firehouse, and they would set up a camera and videotape the parade rig going by or the newer rigs going by, and get everybody on video so they could be seen. They did it. They saw that there was enough. But I don’t know what their experience was like in the firehouse. There’s just no way for me to know that. I couldn’t hide being gay. There was just no way. No more than I could hide being a woman—although I passed a lot of times. When I put the uniform on, I could pass as male. And I wanted to. I felt much safer in that way. Just like when I was a kid. I wanted to wear the uniform that I felt real in. If I happened to pass as male, then that was even better. Let’s take a little break. [interview interruption]

Farrell: Okay, we are back. You had just mentioned that you wanted to talk a little bit about affirmative action and the cultural aspects of integration. Yeah, I don’t know.

Young: I think that there was a game plan in the beginning. I think if you have a cadre of lawyers, there’s nothing seat-of-the pants about that. You have a strategy, you have the legal process you have to do. This was a huge undertaking, the first lawsuit filed. As soon as we took the San Francisco test, they filed an injunction of some type. They said, “Okay, this is a discriminatory test that these women were forced to take.” Instant spotlight, in a way that the other attempts to get the department to validate its testing were not as public. This was intentionally made public. There’s no way to be behind-the-scenes, if you’re going to be a named plaintiff, which they had to do—and I was recruited to be one, as were I think a dozen women. There’s no hiding place. There’s a strategy. This is what we’re going to do to get these people to submit or change. But the whole time you’re doing that, everything was focused on us preparing for the physical test. But nothing prepared us for the choice of being out front. I think the other women who rode this wave, were named plaintiffs who got in and then fell into the background, I don’t know if they’d planned to do that all along. I really don’t know. But they’re going to retire with thirty-year careers, okay? I can’t begrudge them that. They chose wisely. I don’t know what their experience has been like, but they got thirty-
years. They’re going to have a pension that’s really good. I could look back on my career and look at the ways in which I should have stepped back. I could armchair quarterback till kingdom come. I don’t want to do that. Whenever you look at the actual tool, this should never have been a fight to the death.

That’s where Bob Demmons and I parted ways. I didn’t want to sacrifice my career. I never wanted to be harmed by the—I didn’t see that as part of the bargain. Because I didn’t take care of myself, I needed somebody to take care of me and see me as the player. If I had been on a professional football team, they would’ve been icing me and taping me and giving me surgery and making sure that whatever I strained or broke or whatever was happening, that I was taken care of. But we were all on our own. You’re thrown out to the firehouse and you were expected to be this player, this full-on player, and choose the team every single time, when it may not have been the best choice for you. It’s not a good strategy. It wasn’t. I can’t go back in time and say, we should’ve done this. What we did worked. Women got in, blacks were promoted, a black man was chief of department. Yes, there are still practices in the department today that discriminate. I know women are harassed in that department. I know for a fact that some things have not changed at all. They’ve plateaued at about 200-some-odd women. I don’t know that they’re going to get beyond that. In a department of 1500, what’s the percentage, okay? Out gays? I don’t know. They don’t even ride in the parade anymore. The last two parades I recently went to, no fire department, no police. No city represented, in terms of trades. Is there a backlash? What’s going on? The whole idea that we have to represent and force this issue every time we go to work, it’s there already. I had no choice in the matter. Every time I’d show up to work, I was the poster child. But did I have to be as vocal? Did I have to? No. I don’t know at what point I hamstringed myself. I don’t know. All I know is that it wasn’t as necessary as we all thought. I think that that’s true now.

There’s a huge backlash for quotas. In the school system. The whole idea that anybody needs a hand or whatever—there’s no idea of common good. I think a fire department is a common good. It’s something we pay taxes to have, right? Women pay as many taxes as men, right? They’re 50% of the population. The percentages of ethnic groups in the city are documented. So the department should reflect those. It seems like a no-brainer. But that’s never been the case. When I ran the recruitment and I said, “We’re not going to actively recruit or put money into recruiting white men,” people lost their minds. They thought, are you kidding me? Isn’t that discriminatory? I thought, really? You don’t get it. We don’t need to recruit these people. They tell one another. Hang on a second. [interview interruption]

Farrell: All right, we’re back. So you were talking about the integration and the cultural aspects of that.
Young: Everything I’ve read about how the brain works, about evolution, and I’ve read a lot about surviving trauma and the ways in which the brain is very vulnerable, but also very powerful in coping, that we’re hard wired to distance ourselves from that which is different. The worst-case scenario is to destroy what’s different. That’s how we’ve survived as a species. It’s nothing to trifle with. It’s part of the mandate of survival that’s written into the autonomic nervous system. You breathe without thinking about it. You fight off what’s different without thinking about it. You have to use your brain to override that. But if there’s anything in place culturally or familialy—that pumps you up to fight, you don’t stand a chance. Every single person in that department made a choice to plug into that culture. I never bucked the culture. I loved firefighting. I lived it. For me, it was exactly who I wanted to be. Where I went astray was trying to be in that culture. That when you take on something, when you’re trying to integrate—. The whole idea of integrating, that a major metropolitan department like San Francisco could actually reflect the percentages of population that it serves, that it could speak all its languages, that it would have women helping women, that there would be a reasonableness to it. We’re not even talking about the mechanics of the job itself; we’re talking about the customer-service aspect, which is at the base of everything that that job is, that the public is who we serve. To even have that mindset is more feminine than masculine. So to even go in and want to be a part of that job, I’m asking the job to change with me. I can’t not do that. I’m going to improve the way I behave or how I perform, and it’s going to show the differences between me and the people I work next to. When I became an officer, I had a standard of care. I had protocols and procedures. There were things in place that were never enacted or enforced. I chose to enforce them. I had a mindset of how we would behave, and that made me stand apart. It wasn’t the job itself; it was how I wanted to do it, what I brought to it.

Now, I know there are men that were very conscientious, that had standards that they wanted met. I knew chiefs that I wanted to work with because they were like that. I was more like them. But ultimately, that I, a woman, could be a hero, could do this physical job. I was always going to be different, in a larger scheme of things, truly. I think that the department could catch up. I don’t think that things have to stay the same at all. They haven’t. Some basic things do. But the mechanics and how the job is performed, I’ve seen other fire departments transformed. There was a chief over in Oakland who mentored me, was very supportive when I was taking my promotional tests. He went on to become the chief of Colorado Springs, and he transformed that department. He did it by showing them that it could be done in a different way and by doing it himself, behaving in that way. He won their respect as somebody who could get a job done, who was efficient, who had their best interests in mind. He wasn’t standing there telling them what to do. San Francisco shot itself in the head, when they put themselves in the position of being told what to do. I bet there were people in positions of power who saw the writing on the wall, just like San Jose did, who said, “You know what? We
could be a little more in control of this. We don’t have to have it done to us.”
But the cultural pressures to fit in probably overwhelmed them. I’m sure Ray
[Raymond] Connors was like, hey guys, you might want to think about—but
he wasn’t in a position to change anybody’s minds.

I think the system itself forced people to conform. It forced them to make a
choice. Whether it was a choice that benefitted everybody—I don’t think the
choices that these guys made benefitted them. I think it held off something
that was going to happen anyway, but I think it degraded them as men and as
people. On some level, they know that. So in terms of integrating, it is not a
process of folding people in together. It is no different than healing, in my
mind, a larger social problem. You can do whatever you want. I don’t want to
use terms like, you can’t do that. The whole idea of dictating behavior, and
that that will lead to changed attitudes, I don’t believe that anymore. I don’t
know that the men who tried to push me off that roof that day would agree
with me either, that if somehow they could’ve bought into it, or they could’ve
seen how we were more alike; if there had been more work done to build
relationships.

And it’s not pie in the sky. I’ve done political organizing since I left the
department, and I’ve always had that bent of how to bring people together. It’s
a desire of mine to connect deeply. I think it made me a good firefighter to
really want to know what’s going on and to understand if someone’s
distressed. Or if one of the people who worked under me had an issue or
weren’t performing at their best, that I would key into that, that I would see,
because their bad day affected everybody. Your crisis is why we’re here, so
we all want to align with your crisis. We’re not individuals anymore. We’re in
this united. I don’t think we ever had a united front, ever. And we were never
going to have it, if we were trying to force something to happen. I don’t think
I should ever have been the tip of the spear. I really don’t. Or any of the
women in there. Now, to say that you can’t manage the department without
breaking a few eggs. Yeah, something’s going to happen. But I think that
there’s a way to do it that. I don’t even want to go into how to manage the
department. It’s not of interest to me in the same way anymore. Team building
sounds way too weak. It’s this idea that there’s a reason why these people are
behaving this way. There’s a reason why we want to be in the department. No
one talked about the underlying reasons at all. It was like, you have to do this.
You have to be the first person, the first woman in there. That’s the only way
it’s going to change or that you have to resist that first person. I think there
were more people that were standing on the sidelines watching this gladiator
duel that could’ve influenced that and said, this gladiator duel’s not necessary.
But the cultural pressure to back a side was too great. It was way too great. I
don’t know how long it would take. I don’t know, I had a flash about
something years ago. They’re finding out, this to be true—Malcolm Gladwell
has actually exposed this—when they’re looking at the violence in police
departments against minority communities, against black people, that there are
individuals within the department that are the ones that do the most of it. It’s not the whole department.

Farrell: Right.

Young: Right? But the department is hesitant to discipline or remove these individuals, so their influence on all the people around them creates this atmosphere. It’s no different than the fire department. There’s an alpha male who says, this woman’s got to go. She’s going to kill you. If she’s your officer, it’s a bad thing. It’s your job, if you have to work with her, to make sure that she’s unhappy the whole shift. Or if you get an opportunity, kill her. What do you do in the face of that, if that’s the assignment you get? You call in sick. The first day I worked as a truck officer at Station 14, everybody called in sick. Everybody. I arrived and there were people coming in. Nobody told these guys that were coming from other stations that I was the officer, so they all arrived to me being their officer. It was pretty funny. But I wonder why they chose to call in sick. They didn’t want to take on that job? They didn’t want to deal with the stress of it? Were they really that mad at me? The underlying fear of them being hurt, the preservation of this system, are huge. They’re top of the list. They’re priorities. When I was going through the trial, one of my attorneys likened it to fragging. In a military setting, when you have actual war going on. I’m pretty sure it happened in World War II, but it happened a lot in Vietnam, where these guys would be there fighting day in and day out and they’d be battle-hardened. Their officer would get killed and they’d send some officer who was like a freshly-minted penny, from West Point. These guys would take one look at him and size him up, and they would decide right then and there whether he was going to get them killed or not. If he was going to get them killed, the first opportunity they had, they would shoot him in the back. It was called fragging. I think there was an element of that. I think the whole idea that you can force people into the same place is just as violent as the resistance. It doesn’t take into account that people are malleable, that there is a way to—that we do have a bigger brain, that people can transform. They’re not given an opportunity to do that.

Whether it would’ve worked with the department, I can’t go back and say because that’s not what happened. But I think that I could’ve survived. I don’t think things had to be the way they were. It changes my view of affirmative action. I still think we’re trying to force something. We’re talking as if we don’t belong there. We’re going to have to force you to accept us. I think there’s just way larger—and I think it’s changing now, with social media and the interconnectedness, and that a lot of younger people. I hang out with a lot of younger people. They take for granted their status, but they’re very aware that racism and sexism still exist. Certainly not in the farming community. But in institutions, if they tried to get a job, there are hierarchies. They get it. They don’t see them as correct. They’re much more aware of the social pressures they’re under, and they want to reject that. They want to move towards a, who
are you? Let’s get to know one another. I saw people who were political enemies sit down and talk at a table and find out homelessness connected them. It’s possible. It is possible. It’s a lot more work, and I can’t say that there’s fewer casualties, but it’s a whole different experience of transformation. I loved to teach. When I got a chance to teach in the department and I was a medical protocols instructor, I could’ve really focused on that as a career move and had a longevity with that. I saw people drop their guard when in that setting, they saw that I had skill, that I was confident. I wasn’t on their territory; I was sort of on the doorstep of their territory. There are ways in which I could have eased in. But that wasn’t the job that I was assigned.

I don’t think anybody should be assigned the task of integrating. But maybe because people see it as the only way, there’s always a Rosa Parks. But you know what? Rosa Parks wasn’t the first women who sat on a bus; it was a pregnant teenager. Okay? That’s not the front we want to put up. Right? I think we should stop playing games. If somebody doesn’t want to do their job—it’s as tough as that. If you don’t want to do your job as prescribed, then you can go find another job. The whole thing of it. An act of stupidity. I don’t know if we’re talking—did I answer your question?

Farrell: Well, yeah. I guess one of my, for today, last questions for you is—so we just went through some of these photos, and off tape we talked. You look really happy. Despite all the, I guess, constant challenges and the choices that you made every day when you went to work, what kept you happy and inspired during your time with the department?

Young: When I was a firefighter, I got to do things all the time that were fabulous. Once I promoted to lieutenant, there was very little that made me happy. My quality of life and my sense of purpose dropped way off. I couldn’t bond with anybody, because I was sent to a different firehouse every shift that I worked. After a go-round of a year or so and having been at every firehouse, I knew the ones that were most hostile to me. When you’re in for the day, you can’t do anything, really. You can’t take on anybody. You have to just sort of tread water. Maybe get them to drill, maybe they participate. For the most part, you’re just trying to get through the shift. That’s true of anybody. You’re just covering for somebody. You don’t have any skin in the game. That’s a very hard position for me to be in, because I banked on showing people that I was capable of doing the job. It was too much. It was too much to try and learn all the ins and outs, and do it at the same time, and be new. They would want to send me to the same houses that were mean. I had a guy on the inside at assignments that I would call. I had to call the day before to find out where I was working. I would call and hang up until he answered the phone. He knew I was calling and he would try and answer the phone. It was like he was helping me, and he would hold a spot at a hospitable station for me as long as
he could, and he would send me there. I would instantly relax and be able to
go. If I got a bad house, I would start throwing up. I would have crying and
yelling jags. I had horrible health problems. This happened every single time I
went to work. So I couldn’t rely on my job anymore. When I got to the
firehouse, I was very much what they call rules and tools. Nothing bad was
going to happen on my shift. I was constantly forced—I saw this with other
officers, that they had to decide whether to make people do their jobs or not,
whether they were going to hold people to a standard. Especially if they were
a new officer, you really couldn’t. If you were an established officer and
people knew you were coming in and you were going to make them do
something, or hey, we’re going to get something done or whatever, they
would go along with it. But new? Forget it. It’s like [being] a substitute
teacher. I don’t know what kept me going. I thought I had to. That was pretty
much it. I never had sick time on the books. I used it up as soon as I got it.

Eventually, it took its toll. I was really, really struggling physically. At the
same time, I faked it. I went to work, I looked good, I knew how to work the
radio, I had my gear, I could get on and off the rig. People didn’t know. They
didn’t know what it was like to be me. When I made a good call and I did
reports and I got the job done—and I did get the job done—somehow I felt
like I was getting stronger. But the other was more than that. I couldn’t build
up enough of a reserve of feeling confident and good to counter the fear of
working at a station where I didn’t know what was going to happen. I really
didn’t. They would be openly hostile.

I asked to be assigned to a station. I said, “I really need to have a permanent
house.” Bob and I went to talk to Chief [Frederick] Postel about that. I need to
tell a story about Chief Postel. I don’t even know if he’s still alive. Because I
took the lieutenant’s test—all right, let me just back up. I took the test because
Mom said to take any test that comes along. Again, my job was to be this tip
of the spear. So of course, I’m going to take it. Bob was very much like,
you’ve got to take this test. Of course, you’ve got to take this test. It was never
any, you don’t have to take it if you don’t want. That was just not going to
happen. You’re eligible; you’re going to do it. Well, I’ve only been in the
department—. I’m off probation about a year. Granted, I’d worked for Daly
City for a year and a half. I had some time under my belt, I had a degree in
fire science, I had all these things that pointed to, yes, of course. But I was not
stable emotionally to take this on. I was still really feeling like I was
establishing myself as a firefighter. I felt good as a firefighter. I studied. I did
what I would do. I came out number twelve on the list. They didn’t see it
coming. They really didn’t see it coming, that something like that would
happen. They were going to have to promote me. They wouldn’t even have to
use banding to do it. I agree with banding, which says that within a range of
twenty to thirty people, those candidates are equal. Anyway. Postel called me
downtown. Now, I had been told never to go into anybody’s office without
somebody with you. You just don’t. But I went. The man basically offered me
whatever I wanted, if I wouldn’t take the promotion. “If you just wait, Anne. Just wait till the next test. I’ll send you downtown, you get—.” In fact, they’d already sent me to Station 1, and people were nice as pie. Okay? And that was one of the houses that was heavy-duty. Now, granted, I caught a fire early on my first shift there, and we went and we went to work and it was great. I loved working at Station 1. A lot of the black men would never go there again, because that’s where all the bad acting—. But here I was fitting in. Now, these guys may have been buttering me up. Make her feel welcome, make her feel good. Let her see that it’s possible to get her to not do this thing, this promotion. The timing of it was really weird, and I knew it. I don’t think I’m making this up. This chief, chief of department saying, “Just don’t promote and I’ll give you an assignment at 1. You can work downtown for a while.” Which is primo. That’s a prime station to get an assignment at if you’re young and you’re a red-ass firefighter.

I didn’t agree to anything. I said, “Oh, okay, I’ll think about it,” and I left. I knew that that was it. That was the critical choice. If I didn’t promote, I stood a chance. But if I did, it was it. The gloves would come off. I went to a women’s fire conference—this is before I actually was promoted—that’s the whole thing I talked about at that conference. I was wiped out. I was so exhausted from the fear and the anxiety and the angst, and what should I do? There were plenty of women there who said, “Don’t do it. Don’t do it. If your goal is to get thirty years, don’t do it.” And other women said, “If you don’t do it, there won’t be anybody. They’ll figure out a way. You snuck by. They didn’t see you coming. Believe me, they will fix these tests so that other women can’t get—and that’s, in fact, what they did; they changed things. It was three years before anybody else was promoted. By then, I was dead on my feet. I was literally just dead. But I made the choice to promote. It was me and Bob. My mom, again, at my promotion. All these women came to support me. There’s the group of us. It looks normal. It looks absolutely normal. But I was terrified. Whatever was in me, I was running out. I was running out. So keeping me going, I don’t know what kept me going. I really don’t. What’s interesting is, I got an assignment to a house where I was going to be there, and they put me with a captain who I had had an altercation with at another firehouse. I didn’t even realize it until the first shift, that it was the same man. I thought, oh, boy. I’m done now. I can’t ask for another place. Here I’m with this guy who absolutely openly hates me. What’s happened? Why am I here?

The very second watch or whatever, we got a fire down in the Mission. It was a big, multiple-alarm fire. That’s where the push happened. It was at the beginning of my tenure there, about a month. So I go and I have this event that’s a watershed event. It’s like I have no way to cope with this. My mind and my body will not do my bidding anymore, once this thing happens and I keep myself from going over the edge of that roof. I had a nervous breakdown, but I lasted a month. See, I thought I left that next day; that next
shift, that I just signed up and said, “I can’t do this. I need to go off on disability.”

But I made myself go to work for a month. I got worse and worse every day that came by. I lost tools, I broke things, I couldn’t give commands. I became my worst nightmare; I became incompetent. I became everything that they had said I was. I became that. And I couldn’t stand it. Until finally, I couldn’t even leave the house. That was it. Bob came to see me at my place, after I hadn’t gotten out of bed for a week. My partner at the time was gravely concerned that I was going to kill myself, which was definitely a possibility. I couldn’t function. I couldn’t function anymore. It didn’t occur to me that the levels of stress that I was consuming, that I was subjecting my body to, could result in this kind of health damage. I thought you just toughed it out. It’s just not true. It took me a long time. I still haven’t recovered fully from the stress. It’s like heatstroke. If you overheat to the point where you have heatstroke, you break your internal thermostat, and you can never overheat again without becoming very sick. I broke my stress thermostat. Any kind of stress makes me sick. Even good stress. It’s sad, but true. I slowly came back from that. Bob got me an assignment with civil service, where I didn’t have to wear our uniform. I did this training gig for a while. Then he asked me to do the recruitment, which was crazy. Talk about ironic. I’m standing there trying to encourage women to come into this job. I thought, “Please don’t ask me if I like it.” I ran the recruitment, and I managed to step up and do a targeted recruitment and stand by that. And Bob stood by it. It wasn’t perfect. Our relationship really started to deteriorate, because he was in a position of power and he was not taking care of me at all. I needed taking care of. I really did.
Interview 2: November 11, 2016

Farrell: Okay, this is Shanna Farrell, back with Lieutenant Anne Young on Friday, November 11, 2016. This is our second session for the California Firefighters, San Francisco Fire Department Oral History Project. When we left off last time, we were talking about your time working in stations before you got promoted, but I wanted to kind of go back and talk a little bit about your training and the foundation that you had before you joined. So that’s at City College, in fire science studying that, and then eventually taking Chief [Frank] Blackburn’s class. Can you tell me a little bit about that experience and how that enabled you to move into the department with a solid foundation of knowledge?

Young: It truly did. I have the ability, and I also had the type of mind that is very attuned to strategies and troubleshooting. Troubleshooting’s one of the best things for me to do. It’s like a puzzle, only much more instant. Because I also had mechanical ability. I came into the whole proposition of being a firefighter as someone who had these innate abilities. Obviously, they could be developed more and I could—it takes time and you need to actually work with things, in order to get good at it. But I felt like I was the perfect candidate to learn something like firefighting. It intrigued me. I entered into the whole testing process. I was encouraged by my brother, my older brother, who was already in the San Francisco department; I happened to come across a recruitment poster for the San Jose Fire Department; and my mother raised me to be a civil servant. She didn’t talk about higher education, she talked about getting a good job with benefits and a retirement. I was primed for that. Then I go in there with this skillset of mechanical reasoning and a strategist’s mind. And it was very, very satisfying, learning how to do things that were related to firefighting, and then understanding the concepts of what governs fire behavior, the physical laws. All of that. It really does cover quite a bit of education, if you look at it. Then it’s a total-person workout. Your body’s involved, your mind’s involved. It was the whole package. For me, that was incredibly satisfying. Then there’s this whole component that I later became so attuned to that it was, in a lot of sense—it changed my mind about what the job of firefighting was, and that was working with the public in crisis, to truly care for somebody. To come into their chaotic disaster and have the skill set, the temperament, and the tools to actually affect change—there’s nothing more satisfying than that.

There’s a lot of glory attached to heroics and screaming through the night in a fire engine and arriving someplace and—the heave-ho of it is also incredibly satisfying, the gear. But all of that, I grew into as I began to take tests and see all of the things, and the culture behind it and the way in which the firefighters interacted. It was absolutely something I grew to love and care about, and see myself as. I was still young. I was eighteen, nineteen, twenty. I took tests for six years around the state of California, and every test strengthened me. Every
studying session, all of the time I spent with other people, trying to get jobs. You build community. That’s satisfying, as well. There’s a culture of emergency service workers that’s a whole world unto itself. Belonging is at the top of the list of needs for human beings, and there’s nothing more steeped in belonging and purpose than firefighting. I imagine a cop would say the same thing about being a police officer. Soldiers, definitely feel that, although oftentimes they’re forced into situations. So to pursue it to the nth degree, that’s how I was built. So of course, I was going to, during the time that I took tests, enroll in City College. I worked as a janitor for the San Francisco Public Libraries during that time, and it was a great job. Part-time, early in the morning, and then I could get on a bus and ride out to City College. The City College had a curriculum package for me that included athletics, all of the other things that support the degree in fire science—math and history. I really appreciated being a student in a lot of different ways. But the fire science classes were the bulk of what I took, because that was my degree. I also became an EMT, and that was through an extension of City College, John Adams College. So it was full-time, more than full-time, for almost two years. And in addition to that, training to take tests in various counties and cities.

Farrell: How did the written tests differ across California, from San Francisco’s test?

Young: They were, in a lot of ways, very, very similar.

Farrell: Okay.

Young: Yeah, yeah. It was math, mechanics. You had to be able to do algebra questions. The written question of like, if so-and-so has three apples and somebody takes one, how many apples does he have left? That’s the very basic premise of that. And then more complicated spatial relations. If this pulley’s turning clockwise and you’re looking at all these belts attached to other pulleys, and the third pulley away from that, which way is that one pulling? You had to be able to look at the belts and determine which—that requires a certain type of—. Yeah.

Farrell: Did you find that the tests had a lot of practical application when you were on a truck?

Young: Oh, you definitely had to have spatial relations if you were working as a firefighter. If you’re a firefighter, you’re directed to do something you’ve already been trained to do. But again, if you’re in a difficult situation, you have to be able to think on your own. People will distinguish themselves in their ability to troubleshoot or their ability to figure out a difficult situation. I was a probationary firefighter at Station 6 on the truck. I’d worked with chainsaws, but not as much as I did then, because that was a truck. That’s a big part of the tools you use. We were at a fire and we were in a basement and
we were opening up the walls, and I had a saw and it hit a wire or something. It just immediately stopped the saw. I pulled it back and my captain came over and asked me what was wrong. I could immediately see what was going on and I said, “Let me have your cutters.” Because he has a tool belt on. He looked at it, and here was a wire going straight through the chain and the bar, and to pull it out would’ve ridiculous. But what I did was I cut it in half right at the chain, and the two ends fell away. To be able to see something like that—it’s dark. That was the fourth fire we’d had on that shift. I was just exhausted, but my brain was still able to perceive the details of that issue. That’s the kind of thing that a spatial relations test would point to. I’m not going to take on every city’s test and go to the point of whether it’s relevant to the job. If a test is being used to weed people out, it’s pretty evident. Adverse impact is something that is apparent if you look at the demographics of who take[s] the test. If it’s all white men, you’re not going to see adverse impact. You’re not going to say, there’s an adverse impact of people that have no spatial relations. Right? But if you do a height test or something that’s designed to weed out people who are short, it’s going to have an adverse impact on short people, which may be more women than men, and then there you have it. Are you actually going to pick up ladders that way, or are you going to pull them off of the rig that way? Is that something that’s contrived?

Now you’re examining the test for a very specific outcome, whether you’re discriminating or not. There’s a big difference between the written tests and the MMPI Minnesota Multiphasic Personality Inventory, which is a standardized psychological test, which is 1500 Scantron questions that are just bizarre. Most emergency services—well, as I recall—when you get to the point of almost being hired, they start giving you that. They want to figure out whether you’re nuts or what your bent is. I don’t completely understand that test, but I’ve taken it at least six times in the course of my life, and each time, it never makes sense to me. But whether it has an adverse impact, I wouldn’t know. There are nuts that get hired as cops. Right? What is it that people are looking for? I know this is kind of a tangent on testing, but it was a really big deal with the San Francisco department, that they were never willing to validate their tests. They just flat out refused. Judges have to intercede to say, okay, we’ve given you the opportunity. The ball’s in your court; you refuse to do it. Now we have to. We developed these tests. I’ll tell you, that opened my eyes to, there is no perfect test. There really isn’t. Then I started to realize that if you have to train to take a test, then you’re basically having to do the job, which unless you actually do the job, you’re not going to do well on the test. Now you’re getting into the physical ability test, which if you had to train to operate some piece of machinery and you didn’t have any time to look at it or touch it before the test, what good is that? If all the guys who have nephews or male neighbors, and they give them access to the machine and they don’t give access to you, what is that? It’s not to say the event itself is bad; it’s how it’s administered.
There was nothing in my education at City College that prepared me for the physical ability test for the San Francisco Fire Department. We didn’t pull hose around, we didn’t lift ladders. It was all cerebral: strategy and tactics, fire prevention, the laws and physics of fire. So where are you going to get that education? Whatever test you provide, if everybody has equal access to it, if all of a sudden you go out and recruit, it’s a whole package. The way they used to do it, they used to make the joke that on the boat over from Ireland, they would hand the fellas the entrance exam. Okay? Or the manuals. Or an application. That was where it started. They had no lack of applicants. 7500 to 8,000 people would apply for a job in San Francisco. This is before the economy tanks. I can only imagine now, right? Okay. If you’re not recruiting and you don’t even think about recruiting, and you don’t post any materials in neighborhoods, you don’t even try, you’re not going to have to deal with people failing. Nobody’s going to complain about coming up short because they all believe they’re on equal footing. But when it’s exposed that they’re not, what do you do to change that? If at some point in the process, okay, now you start recruiting, but your tests are funky and they do in fact discriminate in one way or another, all right, now you change the test. So now you’ve got recruiting, people are getting through the testing process. You get to the fire college. Okay, now there’s practices there that don’t support and train. I’ll tell you, I had a good friend of mine who worked for Oakland. The thing San Francisco used to weed women out, or scare them, was the fifty-foot ladder. In San Francisco, it will always be wooden, because there’re always overhead lines. No matter what new ladders come out that won’t conduct electricity, and they’re like half the weight, they’ll never get them because these wooden ladders are part of tradition. I’m not going to knock it.

All right, fine, you get six people and we can throw the damn thing. That’s one time—maybe twice at a fire, but usually just one time. Okay, that’s reasonable. You start throwing it multiple times at the fire college, over and over and over again, what do you think it’s going to do to somebody? My friend in Oakland said, “This is a tool. It’s a tool. You should never be afraid of your tools.” If you’re teaching somebody to be afraid of their tool, which is very different than respecting—the damn thing weighed 600 pounds. That’s something to respect. Even if you’re a huge guy, you can blow your back out in an instant, doing it the wrong way. Everybody should have a healthy respect for it, but should never be afraid of it. When I went to City College, I was the only woman taking the classes there. It was like people, they just had to adapt. The other students, they weren’t firefighters; they were just like me. They were trying to become firefighters. In a way, there were sort of like, I’m going to keep my head down and work because I’m not a part of this culture yet. I don’t have anything to sort of like be better than you. I don’t remember having a lot of interactions with the students in those classes. I just don’t. But I don’t remember them treating me in a way like I was less than. I felt like we were the same. I kept going back to the classes.
The two instructors that I remember the most were a fella named Kilgaraff and then Chief Blackburn. It was a sweet gig. Think about it. They get to go to City College and teach. I don’t know how much they made, but they’re just standing up there telling stories, basically. And you have written material and then you give a test. I get it. Most of the higher education I pursued after I became a firefighter, or even after I got my degree in fire science. It’s an AS degree, so some people will look at that as sort of like a trade degree, as opposed to a bachelor’s, which has more, I don’t know, clout or something. I studied and had to retain information and had to put into use in a classroom setting. I feel like I worked pretty hard. I didn’t feel like I was treated any different by the instructors, until I got to Chief Blackburn’s class. I think he struggled a great deal with the fact that I was there, number one, and that I was asking him questions that were pertinent to what he was talking about. It’s very odd to talk about myself in a way that makes me sound superior or in some ways better than, but I was kind of forced to do that from the very beginning. Justify my place, wherever it was to do with the fire department. Yeah, I earned this. Yes, I’ve worked very hard. Yes, I’m smart enough; yes, I’m strong enough, and here’s how. The written tests may have been standardized for all the departments around the state, but the oral interviews, when I finally started getting to them because I started passing the physicals, there was no standardization for those. These chiefs, or whoever was sitting there on the panel, could ask me anything they wanted, and it was truly bizarre. They would have me do pushups, they would ask me details about my workout schedule, they would ask me questions about my personal life. Nowadays, lawyers would have a field day with that. But I saw that if I wasn’t going to answer the questions or if I copped an attitude about it, I wasn’t going to get hired. I wasn’t even going to be considered. I just went with it. If I didn’t want to tell them something, I faked it. They weren’t entitled to details about my personal life. They didn’t ask me questions about my sexual orientation, but they did ask me my marital status, how I felt about working with guys, would I date them in the department? I have to give them credit; they really were thinking ahead, like these may be the issues. Later on, it turned out to be true that the wives of the firefighters weren’t all that happy with women being in the fire station. They felt that living with their men for twenty-four hours exposed their men to us as sexual objects and would tempt them. Now, I’ll tell you, all the experiences I had—I had one guy ask me out one time. He had some tickets to a 49ers game, and he asked me to go with him. I said, “No, I’m not going to go out with you. Sorry.” Nice about it or whatever. I thought that was really odd because we work together. This is somebody I didn’t even really know. I knew for a fact that he really wasn’t interested in me. It’s like they’d put one another up to ask me questions. This is sort of like you are an invasive species, in a way. You’re viewed at something that was like, okay, this is out of the ordinary. Some people think that you’ve got to be eradicated, and other people are sort of like, well, how bad can it be? But to be grilled on things that have nothing to do with
firefighting, to be asked to defend my intelligence and physical strength, always—I used to say that a woman’s job description was very different than a man’s. That in addition to firefighting, you also had to be willing to be a poster child for affirmative action; that you had to be somewhat of a therapist, because people were drawn to you to unburden themselves or to get you to unburden. It was this psychological warfare, the strategies that were employed to see what made you tick, and also to see if you could be compromised, in a way. I never felt anybody asking me that as other students at City College, why do you want to do this? They seemed to be completely focused on their own stuff, or they wanted to ignore me altogether.

But Chief Blackburn took an interest in me. I believe this, because it was towards the end of the course, and I had grasped these concepts of fire mapping and fire planning, things like fire load. This barn that we’re sitting next to right now, there’s a fire load that can be calculated, based on the linear feet of timber, all right? And the density of the wood, the type of wood and the square footage of it, the structure itself, how much open space, whether there’s any fire retardant material. There’s not a dab of fire retardant material in this barn. It’s not meant to be insulated or compartmentalized; it’s a big, open space. It’s kind of like this huge pile of kindling. So you can calculate the fire load, how many BTUs, British Thermal Units, of heat this thing will create; how fast it will burn, given how long it’s going to burn, where the fire starts. Again, every unit of time, the fire doubles. So from there, you can calculate how many gallons of water you need to put it out and how fast you need to get the water on there. At some point, it’s mathematically impossible to put it out. Well, put it out in terms of saving part of it.

**Farrell:** Right.

**Young:** Okay? The larger timber structures that are supporting it are going to burn. They’re not going to fail as quickly as the smaller ones, depending on how hot it gets, and it’s going to get pretty damn hot pretty fast. There’s a lot of wood there. I’m sitting there repeating back or asking questions related to this science because I get it and I want to—I’m figuring out how to be a fire officer, because that’s the class. Strategy and tactics isn’t meant for the firefighter. They’re just like, get that hose up there. I want you to lay a three-inch hose from the engine, put a Y on there and get some fifty-foot lines in there, one in the front, one in the side. And don’t forget to put your Scott airpack on. He sees this. I know he does. He’s a very smart man. But he’s got a Napoleon complex. He’s not the biggest dude on the block. But the story about him going to the fire college just before the recruits graduate was, he would have them all line up and he would just walk down the line like Mussolini, and he would assign people based on their height. He’d get to a tall guy, “Truck.” Short guy, “Engine.” He would basically decide where everybody went, based on their height. He was very focused on size, having big firefighters on his crew. Like chess pieces. I remember him glorifying this
guy who could carry not only the jaws of life, the instrument itself, but the hydraulic pump generator that powered it. This one person carrying these two things—it’s several hundred pounds, between the two—into wherever it needs to go. That was his idea of efficiency and what a firefighter should be able to do, super-human stuff.

Farrell:

What did you learn from him when you were in class with him?

Young:

Because I saw the kind of mind that he had and the kind of leader he was, I admired him. I knew that I could learn a lot. In a perfect world, I would’ve loved to have had him as a mentor. He would’ve been the perfect teacher for me, because he was no holds barred. Get in there and do it, but do it because you know how to do it. It’s not just throwing shit at a fire; you’re going in there with a calculated plan. But if stuff goes wrong, you have a plan B and a plan C, and you’ve already set up for that. He was a great big-fire chief. I never got to work with him on a small fire. I’m not sure where he was. Anyway, the point is, is that I wanted to learn from him. But I could see that it was difficult for him. I grew up in a household where you had to read body language or you ran into difficulty. It’s a form of codependence and it’s not healthy, because at some point, you think you can read people’s minds. But reading body language and whether someone’s safe to be around or not, you get pretty attuned to that. I consider myself a good judge of people’s actual state of being, and I could tell that he didn’t like me. But it didn’t deter me. I didn’t press the point and go up after class and ass kiss and do all these things like give him an apple. I saw that that was never going to be part of it; but I didn’t see any problem with me asking questions, and I did really good on the assignments. I don’t remember what grade I got in his class, but I could probably find my transcripts, and I’m sure it was at least a B.

But one day, he either met me at the elevator or we happened to be there at the same time. He just flat out said to me, “Why don’t you go into fire dispatch or the medical?” I looked at him like, wow, where’d that come from? He kept insisting, and at the same time, kind of backing me into a corner by the elevator, physically intimidating me. Like, you don’t want to go out to the firehouse; you don’t belong there. Go into dispatch or medical or prevention. I just looked at him. It was a betrayal of sorts. It’s like his was a poison apple, right? Okay? I just looked at him and I said, “That’s not what I want to do.” End of story. Some way or another, I broke off contact in that moment. But I realized that he was not someone to be trifled with, and behaving like a good student in his class didn’t endear—it was my first inkling that my mother’s model of how to get by, especially in civil service, wasn’t going to work. Her whole thing was, your work ethic will show your worth. You show up and you do a good job, you take every test, people will recognize that. It worked for her in a white-collar clerical setting. She went from being a file clerk and retiring as a legislative analyst. For someone who had a high school education, that’s pretty damn good. I wrote her obituary and in it, I said—and this is
true—that when she retired, she trained three lawyers how to do her job. Okay? They were paid a hell of a lot more than she was. The bane of the working woman.

But the fact that I was an attentive student and I was smart and that I milked every single bit out of that class didn’t matter a bit. It was really deflating; but it was also really infuriating. It got me mad. I remember thinking, fuck him. He should be encouraging me. Hey, good job. There was no one of those other guys in the class who was doing what I was doing. I just felt like, okay, maybe there’s some other way that it’ll be all right. I had a level of denial that was unprecedented, because if I had stopped to think at that point about what his actions as a leader. I understood how people follow examples, that you have to set a tone as a manager. I certainly understood it much better after years of doing it, but I got that this guy was the top, and here he was behaving in a way that was really screwed up. So what did that mean about the people who he led?

It didn’t stop me from getting my degree and becoming the EMT and continuing to take tests. In a lot of ways, I was more determined. I thought, he’s old, yes. I, in way, dismissed him, which was sad for me because like I said, I really wanted to be his student. I wanted him to mentor me, and I had to dismiss him as somebody who was backwards-thinking. I was never going to have access to his knowledge.

Farrell: How did the testing differ from when you were preparing for the lieutenant test?

Young: Oh. It’s a funny thing because by the time I was taking the lieutenants’ test, I think it was a year and a half or so into being a San Francisco firefighter. That was 1989. So we were hired in ’87. ’89. People were flabbergasted. “You haven’t been in long enough.” “Well, she was a firefighter in Daly City for a year and a half.” So what? It’s like no mentoring in sight for how to fight fires when I was in there. I had fire officers who were in charge of me, training me when I was a probationary firefighter, but I wouldn’t call it mentoring. I would call it instruction. Mentoring’s very, very different. All right? I witnessed mentoring on a daily basis. These guys whose nephews or sons or whatever, who come in. I call them the new old-timers, because they’d heard stories around the dinner table their wholes live growing up, and they were going to join this fire department that was steeped in tradition, and here they had to work with a woman. They were more pissed off than their dads were, in a lot of ways. But here I was. I would ask people, I said, “Okay, when was the last fire you went to?” They would say, “Oh, whatever,” and they would tell me. I’d say, “Okay, what did you learn at that fire? What do you remember about it?” “Well, I laid some hose line. Right away, I was on the nozzle.” I’m like, “Well, how big was the building? How many units were
there? How many alarms was it? Do you know anything about that fire other than what you did?” If they couldn’t answer the question, I said, “The last fire I went to,” and I would describe in detail, because that’s what I had done in those classes. So I said, “Let’s think about it. Let’s say in the year and a half, if I’ve been to twenty fires.” Which is the beauty of working for a city like San Francisco, is you go to a lot of fires. Daly City, I think I went to two. Maybe one. One and a half, right? They just so bad-mouth small departments. It’s surround and drown and nobody knows how to fight fire and blah-blah-blah. They’re firefighters. Different types of fires, but not as many. So you get a little rusty, whatever. San Francisco, like I said, I had a truck. A day on the truck, we had four fires. And they were big fires. I was so tired at the end of that shift, but I had learned so much. Not because my fire officer told me, but I had to learn everything out of observation or doing.

My truck officer never once let me go on the roof with the guy that went to the roof with the saw, even though I asked, “Hey, when do I get to?” “Oh, you know.” That’s the kind of stuff you couldn’t complain about. I was not about to go to somebody in the division of training and say, my truck officer isn’t training me. That would’ve been really bad. But if you’re denied training, you have to make do. You have to figure it out. So every fire I went to, I learned a lot more. So was I prepared? I’ve always been the kind of physical presence, taking up a lot of space. I’m a Leo. I learned how to be funny to get by. I’m a good judge of character. I learned all these things as survival mechanisms. But I have the intellect and the physical stamina to back them up. A very butch, strongly butch-identified lesbian. I was very much in my body, in a way that is considered masculine in this culture. And I’m a thinker. My mom supported and nourished that as best she could. Let’s stop for a second.

Farrell: Sure. [interview interruption] Okay, we’re back.

02-00:34:57
Young: All right. So the fact that the lieutenants’ test came up, Bob was all over this. “Of course, you’re going to take the test. The black firefighters will help you train.” He had an agenda. We were right on schedule. The reason the lieutenants test came up really fast is because they had created and validated brand new tests. These were not the old tests. The old tests were all multiple choice questions. You had to study every document that the fire department produced—the training manuals, the general orders, all of the policies of the department—and have that information committed to memory, in order to take this test. But it was just a multiple choice test. This is documented, that guys would go in, they would be told, “You’re going to remember questions one through ten. When you come out of the test, you’re going to write them down.” They would recreate the test, and then they would hand out—they would keep using the same three different versions of the same test, and these guys would study the questions. Not the information in the manuals, but the questions. Not the same thing as knowledge. It really isn’t, okay?
Farrell: Right.

Young: That’s how they would get promoted. I’m not going to take that and say they were bad officers, because they had mentoring. It was just an obstacle to their getting promoted.

Farrell: You got it?

Young: I did.


Young: No, I’m sorry. The first one. Yeah, because if they’d been mentored and they were, in fact, decent strategists and had a leadership quality where people would do what they told them, because respect is earned. If you’re not a good worker, your reputation precedes you. So even if you become a lieutenant, if people don’t respect you, it doesn’t matter. The test becomes moot. Even if you took a good test, if you’re not a good leader or your work ethic’s sloppy or you’re inconsistent, or you’re a bigot. There’s any number of things that can mark you. There’s a label that most people want to avoid, and it’s minuteman. You’d get into the firehouse a couple minutes to eight, when the shift starts, racing in. The person who you’re relieving has had to wait until then, and you’re rushing around. You’re not somebody who goes the extra mile, will clean something up when it needs to be cleaned. A whole crew can be labeled lazy. That wasn’t me. And it never would be. The chief that I had mentioned the last time we did a session, his name is not Bob Lang, it’s Jim Lang. I just wanted to correct that.

Farrell: Oh, okay.

Young: He was also someone. I encountered him before I encountered Chief Blackburn. He was a good friend of the captain I had in Daly City, and he came by the firehouse one day and I was outside. It was late in the day and I was cleaning something. Somebody had dropped off these carryalls, which are large canvas tarps you use for cleanup at a fire or just carrying debris. A lot of times, if a fire happens after a certain time of day, the crew that’s on, especially if it’s in the night, they leave the cleanup of the equipment to the oncoming crew. It’s accepted because, shit, you just fought this fire in the middle of the night. But well before that, if something arrives and it’s dirty and you don’t clean it, you leave it to the next day, it’s like, you had time to do this, why didn’t you? It would never occur to me to leave something to the next shift. I’m there for the whole twenty-four hours. I’ve got plenty of time, and I want to do something. Chief Lang noticed that. He saw me out there and he said something to my captain and my captain acknowledged that that was
the kind of worker I was. So when I met Jim Lang years later as his operator, he remembered that. He already had that in his mind, of me as a certain type of worker. My reputation preceded me. Now, he also heard a lot of shit about me, too. By the time I was driving for him—and it was just for the day. I wasn’t an operator; that wasn’t my position all the time, but I had taken that test. Basically, you fill in for somebody who calls in sick or is on vacation, and you drive a chief. You’re their eyes and ears on the fire. You can get more experience as an operator than you can as a firefighter, or even an officer. You’re going into some big fires and you’re radioing back for the chief, hey, this is what’s going on. Sometimes you’re issuing orders for them. I thought of it as a really good step in my training. So here I am, the type of person I am. I’ve gone to school, I’ve finally gotten into the fire department, I’m exhibiting all these work ethics, that I have a standard for myself. Some people are intimidated by it already. I was a janitor, all right? For six years.

When I’d go into a firehouse and part of the work that we do—and I’m a probationary firefighter—and part of what we do is housecleaning first thing in the morning, I’m getting paid a hell of a lot more money as a firefighter-housecleaner than I was as a janitor for the public library, and I know how to do it. I’m cleaning the hell out of that place, and I’m finding out that it hasn’t been cleaned in a while, that there’s tons of stuff. I could describe things to you that would just make you gag. I actually had, on more than one occasion, a firefighter, an old-timer, come up to me and say, “Hey, slow down. You’re making us look bad.” I said, “Don’t you want this place clean?” “Yeah, but you’re working too hard.” Right? As opposed to, hey, thanks for scrubbing that yellow stain down the front of the urinal. Right? Thank you for really cleaning the floors. Thank you for dusting the top of the—. It was odd. But they didn’t want to look bad. Here I am faced with this. Here’s the lieutenant’s test. It’s a brand new test, where instead of a multiple choice question, they use actual scenarios that you have to apply knowledge to. That’s frightening for some people. You have to train, you have to prepare to hold a mock training session on a specific topic. You don’t know what it’s going to be about. It could be on a chainsaw, it could be on CPR, it could be on anything. Then you also have to counsel a firefighter. Now, this is an aspect of the job that I don’t think a lot of the lieutenants really wanted to grasp, their manager status. If they’d earned the respect, that’s what they banked on. They didn’t have to sit down and discipline people because they could smack them around. But once it got to the point when you couldn’t smack people around, or you worked with people you didn’t know. Maybe somebody who was a minority wasn’t performing to standard. How do you deal with that? How do you show consistent managerial behavior?

I ran into that later in my career, where I had to discipline black men, and it didn’t go well. There were a lot of expectations that I wouldn’t manage, or that I would look the other way. Mm-mm. Then the firefighting scenario, that you had to gauge a fire, you had to make decisions about it, and you had to
vocalize those decisions, and/or draw what you were going to do. Here’s where the first-in engine was going to go. You’re on the first-in engine. You’re sizing the fire up and you’re communicating through your radio, what you see. Then you’re going to tell these proctors. Well, that was a perfect element for me, because I could apply knowledge. I understood strategy and tactics. I understood talking to people about how they could be more effective in their job, because I had those standards for myself. I understood testing in a way I think these other guys hadn’t. I’d taken so many of them. I was also willing to train. Because this is something, again, you can sort of game. There are things that are going to look better, whether you—. Here’s the funny thing is, if you pull it out for a test and you practice how to look like a good manager, in some ways you’re going to be that. You’re not going to get back to the firehouse and go, okay, yeah, I don’t have to do this now. It’s going to stick with you. But I meant it. I did things in the test that were—it was like if I had to shoot from the hip and make something up, I was going to do it. If the scenario was that I’d worked with this guy for twenty years, I was going to behave like I worked with him, and I was going to talk to him like I worked with him for twenty years. I wasn’t going to ask him inappropriate questions, but I was going to make assumptions about his life and our relationship and the level of familiarity.

I did really well on the lieutenants test. It was interesting. I had a mentor, another chief over in Oakland, who I actually felt was a better firefighting mentor than Bob. I never saw Bob work at a fire. I never heard him talk about fires in a way like Chief Blackburn would’ve or this chief in Oakland, where they could dissect it. Some part of me had relegated him to a different kind of officer, or that his job really wasn’t in the firehouse. It was as the president of the International Association of Black Professional Firefighters. When he got up in the administration as a chief, that seemed more reasonable to me than a strategist-tactic[s] person on the fire ground. He hadn’t proven himself to me. The same standard applied to these guys I work with as they were applying to me. I watched plenty of crazy shit with these white guys who were glorified. Every time my brother would tell a story about some black firefighter screwing up royally, I had plenty of white firefighter stories to pull out. Well, hey, did you know about so-and-so? I watched him put, da-da-da. Or back his rig in and block everybody in. Blah-blah-blah. There was no end to it. There was incompetence on both sides of the aisle.

I wanted to work with somebody who took it seriously, so I did most of my real studying and training with this chief in Oakland, although I did participate in the black firefighters training sessions. But the whole time, I’m thinking, I have to do this. Everybody expects me to do this. I decided that I was going to take the test. When I made the decision I was going to take the test regardless of what everybody expected—because it didn’t mean I was going to get promoted—I went into it with that denial.
I also thought, there’s all these other people taking the test, hundreds of other firefighters. It’s going to be a big list. I’m competing. So I’m going to give it my best shot. I came out number twelve on the list, okay? I remember years later, meeting a chief from L.A. who was a—. Because everything was videotaped and recorded, audio recorded. Because there was no proctors watching you in the room, these tapes were given to these chiefs from other departments to proctor. Which was another thing, is that the officers in the San Francisco Fire Department couldn’t be trusted. Well, that’s a huge statement. We can’t trust you with an unbiased—. Now, I wouldn’t mind having somebody like Blackburn proctor my test, if he could be fair about it. I feel that he would’ve seen the quality. But this chief from L.A. came up to me at a Women’s Fire Service conference and he says, “You don’t know me, but I was a proctor for your test.” He said, “Watching you and then watching these other guys,” he says, “It was like night and day.” It was a shot in the arm. This man didn’t know me from anybody. He was obviously an advocate of women; here he was at a women’s conference. By then, I was so worn down it didn’t really have the effect on me that it could’ve. If I had known this right after I took the test, it might’ve helped me, in a way, but—. So other people saw this. I felt it. I felt my potential. There was a point at which I no longer felt it. Like I had used up everything within me. It’s like you have to keep pumping yourself up. You’re going into the big game. Well, you can’t go into the big game every time you work. You just can’t. No one has that kind of stamina.

Coming out number twelve on the list, Chief Postel sent me down to Station 1, which is a busy house. Busy house. I caught a fire like at eight-thirty in the morning. It was fabulous. I felt like I was in my element. All these guys were treating me really well. And in the back of my mind, I had heard all these stories from the black firefighters about these guys at Station 1 harassing the hell out of them. Earl Gage. He was the first black firefighter in the department. I think he came in in the late fifties. There was a dude down there. Or maybe it was Worthy Brooks. Somebody, some black guy, had this dude—and they named him—that put human excrement in his fire boots. Right? Station 1. If one person could do that at that station and nobody would call him on it, the whole station’s poisoned. You can’t trust anybody. Because if somebody else, even if they wouldn’t actually do that to you, they would look the other way, they’re just as bad. Or they won’t acknowledge that something went down and they know. Now they’re lying on behalf of this other person. They don’t want to. They don’t want to be put in this position. I met plenty of guys like that. They would rather just come to work, do their job, work well with people, get to know them. They were human beings. They weren’t political pawns.

Here I was at Station 1, fitting in—or at least I thought that—and it wasn’t naïve. It was like it was such a strong desire. I wanted it to be true. I so wanted it to be true, that I fit in, that I could go to a fire with these guys and they would send me up with everybody, be on the nozzle. These Tenderloin
hotels with the standpipes going up the outside, people cram trash into them. We get up there and the line is charged, but all the trash that’s in the pipe has come up and it’s blocking the nozzle. We kick this door in. We’re ready to put water on it. We open the nozzle and nothing comes out. We’ve got to do this scissor-close thing with the charged line, so that we can take the nozzle off. In the meantime, it’s like you can’t close the door. It was great. It was great.

Then Chief Postel. I think I said this in the last session, where he brought me downtown. I was told by Bob, “Never go to a meeting with a white officer or any administrator. Never go there alone.” I think the union also had that as a tack, that you always had representation, a witness. But for whatever reason, I went down there and I gave Postel his best shot. He did, he basically offered me whatever I wanted, if I didn’t take the promotion. He had to promote me. Here I was. “Well, you can stay at 1.” These guys would be nice to me or something. I don’t know. I don’t even know. We couldn’t talk openly about it. He could only allude to it and offer it.

Farrell: The experience of being a lieutenant, you had described last time as being stressful. Which I think your promotion was met with intense opposition. Then your time as the lieutenant was less than ideal. Can you tell me a little bit about that, I guess, those experiences leading up to—? Before the lawsuit and any events leading up to that.

Young: Well, I’ll tell you. My promotion wasn’t opposed. I competed fair and square with these guys. Unlike the entrance tests, where we had a separate list with women, there was no way they were going to—. Using the same list, they had to figure out a way in which to hire women, so they put in a banding of sorts. I don’t even remember how they justified it, but women were going to be hired. All the women on the list had passed that physical test. Period. They didn’t rank us, but we had shown that we had the physical strength to be trained to be a firefighter. Not be a firefighter, but be trained to be a firefighter. Right? Promotional test, different thing. We all went into it the same. What could they say? He tried to get me to delay it. Bob was, of course, pushing me to promote. The lawyers were pushing me to promote. I don’t ever remember Bob saying, “Listen, if you really don’t want to or if you really have reservations—.” Or even talking about it with him, like the pros and cons. And I had to. I had to talk about it. I went to a Women’s Fire Service conference and I talked about it with women who had promoted. Believe me, they gave me the skinny. Nobody was sitting there blowing smoke up my butt. You’ll be great. It’ll be okay. Just keep your head down and keep going. They were like, it’s a huge sacrifice. Nobody said losing your health or losing your life, but it was sort of like, your life will not be your own. I also met a woman fire officer who basically just dialed it in. She had no desire to be the officer that she was, and she was basically hiding out in a slow station. Her life
wasn't about firefighting, it was about getting through the shift, no surprises, and retiring.

I remember witnessing black firefighters who were doing the same thing. Just hanging in the station, where nothing was asked of them, because they couldn’t really take it. They were coasting. I remember thinking, if I ever get like that, just shoot me. If I have no work ethic at all and I don’t care. But I’ll tell you what, if I knew then what I know now, I would’ve done that. I would’ve done that. Because who knows if I could’ve come back to life? This is where the details get kind of hazy for me. My first shift as a fire officer, I remember working—what I remember is my first fire as a truck officer. It was at my first probationary house, Truck 13, and I was working with guys that knew me as a firefighter. So I think it was a mixed bag. Nobody was going to openly disobey or act in a way that seemed really disrespectful, but they weren’t going to engage with me, either. In fact, my old captain was on the engine that day. The guy who’s assigned to train me. We had this fire, and I think it was in Chinatown. As we pulled up, the truck was where it needed to be.

Here’s the thing, is that you work with seasoned firefighters. If you work with new people, you really have to have your shit together, because you are directing them. But these seasoned firefighters, everybody banks on everybody knowing what to do. Nobody’s sitting around telling somebody who’s been there for twenty-five years as a truck driver, this is where I want the truck. The guy knows. You work as a team. Yes, you say, listen, we’ve got people hanging out of that window; we’re choosing that one to ladder. We’re going to ladder that fire escape. That’s what I told somebody to do. I said, “I want a ladder on that fire escape.” Because it could happen fast and it would help people get out. After that, I don’t remember as much of the fire. But you know what I expected? Oh my God. When we got back to the firehouse, I was so jacked up. It was like, oh my God, I lived through it. It was okay. I wanted to talk about it. Everybody disappeared. It was like I was alone in the firehouse. It was crazy. I was downstairs thinking, where is everybody? Let’s debrief. Come on, captain, tell me what I did right and wrong. No. Not a peep for the whole shift. I didn’t get to debrief, nobody commented, nothing. I have no idea what people thought. It was devastating to me. That’s when I realized how alone I truly was. I may not have gotten mentoring leading up to that, at least in the San Francisco firehouses, and I had to work for the mentoring that I had gotten, but I wasn’t going to get anything after the fact, either. And you need that. You truly need that, in order to maintain perspective. Either I was going to pump myself up as the greatest gift from God in order to get through this insecurity, which everybody faces. I’m sorry, anybody can be insecure about their ability. I was a brand new officer; of course, I’m course I’m going to go like, okay, was that the right size ladder? I think it was; it reached. Then nobody openly disobeyed me. I was directive. I didn’t run away, I didn’t hesitate. I don’t know. No feedback meant I was left to my own critical brain.
If you’re your own worst critic to begin with—in some circles, they call it the shitty committee. I had plenty of things—. I remember every detail of a fire, so I could go over and over and over it in my head. If I had no outside observation, I had to come to my own conclusions. My insecurity started to build in a way that I had to counter it. Now I’ve got this deficit of insecurity. It sounds kind of childish, but if you feel like nobody likes you, anybody would start to respond to that. Your coping mechanisms had better be pretty strong. This is something I learned later on, talking to other women. I think it’s true for men, as well, but I don’t know. I have been out of the business for a long time and I haven’t talked to a fire officer in a sort of like peer way. I never really got that. Bob wasn’t a good after-the-fact mentor either, because nobody liked him either. He didn’t have that kind of rapport, where people would sit down and talk about a fire. But I’m not sure where I was going with that.

Farrell:

I think you had touched on this last time. A lot of kind of what you had endured while you were a lieutenant was laced with harassment and discrimination, which eventually led to a lawsuit. Can you tell me a little bit about leading up to the lawsuit?

02-01:01:24
Young:

Well, if you don’t get trained, you don’t get mentored, the sort of actual events of harassment are just kind of icing on the cake, really. They weren’t the backbone of what my harassment was. It was the lack of connection. I could never bond with my crew, because every time I went to work, I went to a different firehouse. That’s what a new lieutenant does. You’re thrown out to the vacation relief, disability relief positions, and it’s very, very hard to get your footing. So when people did act bad, you didn’t have the stamina. I didn’t have the stamina to cope with it in the same way. It had a real impact on me when everybody called in sick or somebody openly disobeyed me, or somebody messed with my safety gear. That really started to bother me. That actually happened as a firefighter. I had a couple of instances where my safety was compromised. Somebody threw something out of a window and I was standing below. It barely missed me. We’re talking something that weighed several hundred pounds, so when it landed, it was percussive. I looked up there’s nobody there, and everybody on the ground, nobody’s alarmed by this. I’m standing there completely alone with this event, that had I actually been hit and killed. That was the first event that I documented. I said, “If anything happens to me, this happened, and here were all the people that were there.”

The second time was when somebody disconnected the hose to my SCBA [self-contained breathing apparatus] bottle. When I went to put it on going into a fire, it wasn’t connected. Right? I would either run out of air very fast or not be able to go in, in which case, a lot can be said about that. Oh, she wouldn’t go into the fire. Right? Okay? It’s a setup.
As a fire officer, if you can’t count on your crew to do what you ask of them, and you’re still insecure and feeling like you have no perspective on your ability to lead, you’re at a deficit. Now, multiply that by three years. When I think about my tolerance for pain or my ability to manage stress, in a way, I was super-human. I don’t even know why I kept going, at some point. It’s like the kid that grows up in a difficult home. It’s your norm. You don’t think this could be different. When I went to Women Fire Service conferences and I listened to women talk about going to fires, I would listen for stories that were worse than mine, to sort of bolster me. But then I would hear these stories of things that were women having a better experience, and I would get so mad and so demoralized. Well, fuck! I can be different. But then I would dismiss it as, oh, it’s a small department, or oh, it’s whatever. I was constantly comparing myself. But it was a coping mechanism; it wasn’t an actual—. I never thought I had a choice. The only reason that I considered leaving is because I physically couldn’t stay. I gave out. My body and mind gave out.

I had asked enough of it. The crowning glory of someone trying to push me off a roof, which I, to this day, will stand by, that that was their intent. I’m pretty sure I know who it was, and I named him in the lawsuit, and nothing ever came of it. It was a fiasco of botched graphics on the city attorney’s part. This big flipchart of where everybody was standing on the roof and how could I possibly have remembered, and what do you—blah-blah-blah-blah-blah. It was meant to distract. In fact, the jury thought of me as hysterical, because of that event. That that was just a hysteria of sorts and a confusion and I had broken down. They still saw me as credible, but they couldn’t grasp. I think on some level, they couldn’t grasp that someone would actively try to kill me. But having a nervous breakdown is—. If you witness something horrific, you can become catatonic. A child who watches someone get their head blown off. Everybody manages trauma differently, but there are certain things that will shut the brain down. We’re designed to get through that, so that we can continue on as a species, all right? We will block out the pain of childbirth so that we’ll have more babies. It’s the same principle. But at some point, something gives. My level of fear and my ability to think or function left me after that fire. I had recalled that I had left the firehouse immediately and didn’t go back, when in fact, I had stayed another month and endured losing equipment, failing to really direct. I became my worst idea. I became what they said I was, incompetent. Here’s the thing, is that when I first got promoted, they posted the lists in the firehouse, which they always do. People want to see where they are in relation to other people and who’s gotten promoted and blah-blah-blah-blah. Somebody wrote next to my name, “Someone’s going to get killed.” Does that mean that I’m going to kill somebody, or they’re going to kill me? The list disappeared, of course. We asked a chief there to deal with it, and he took it and destroyed it or whatever. What list? He covered for his buddies. But I had a witness to this, that somebody had done that. That was their intent. There’s no way she is going to succeed. At some point, we will act. It’ll be a concerted effort. I know that the guys that
perpetrated that, that they may not have planned it on the rooftop; I presented them with the opportunity. I’m up there. The dawn is coming, it’s still dusky light. There’s smoke. I’m standing near the light well by myself. Why would they pass up that opportunity to do something that they had wanted to do. They want me to go away. Because everybody at that point thinks I’m incompetent. I’m sure an investigation would’ve happened. How could she have—? It’s dark, you don’t know where you are. She’s not that great at firefighting anyway, blah-blah-blah. Down the light well she goes; she’s dead. I doubt they would’ve even put my name on the granite wall downtown. I don’t know.

All I know is that it happened and I slowly came apart, and then there was a point where I couldn’t leave my house. I literally physically couldn’t get out of bed. For years, I’d been making myself go to work. If I was going to go to a firehouse where I knew they were going to harass me or it was just going to be really awful, I would throw up and cry and shake and just have panic attacks, the whole night before. I didn’t sleep. I’d go into the firehouse sleep deprived. Then I would basically go through the motions, and then go up to my room and I would spend the whole day there, either watching TV or just I’d sit in the room. I’d already started becoming catatonic. I didn’t even bother trying to interact with the men. If I went to a house that was receptive to me, it was the exact opposite. I was out there trying to recharge my batteries with people that were respectful and interested. Black firefighters I knew like Mike Cotton, down at 16. If I got to go to 16, it was like—I can’t tell you the immense joy and relief I felt at going to a house that was going to treat me well. Even if somebody got sent in there for the day who was a bad actor, there were way more nice people. There were a lot of young people. But that was few and far between.

Farrell: When you were first starting to document what had happened, did the lawyers encourage to document these, the incidents?

02-01:10:54 Young: They never really talked to women. Again, this is sort of the follow through. Okay, listen. You’re going to be harassed. They were never going to say that to somebody. You’re in; but it’s basically, you’re in and you’re on your own, because even if you hand us stuff—. There was a woman in the department, Vic Hayden, had sent stuff to them. I didn’t know this, but she really knew the score, and she tried to fit in in a way that I never could have. But there was no way they could prepare anybody. But they certainly received enough documentation from women firefighters, they got stuff from me, and they were willing to be the keepers of that. But to go in and investigate or to say, we’re getting an awful lot of incidents from women who want us to safekeep that they’re being harassed and/or their life is threatened or their safety’s threatened. What’s up with that? They want the kind of lawyers that could do that. They didn’t have the in. They were like, get them in; but they couldn’t monitor in the same way. Compliance with the consent decree, it was a huge
brush. Yeah, standardized testing to treatment in the firehouse. Treatment in the firehouse was a whole legal thing in and of itself. The black firefighters didn’t do that for the women. Not to the degree that it was necessary.

Where do you begin? I have my ideas now that it begins with training. Then it begins with officers behaving like managers. But there’s so much pressure on everybody to take a side and to conform to the standards of that side. It was awful. It was awful for the men, as well; I can tell you that straight up. Some of them just completely shut down in my presence. They didn’t want to have anything to do with me, but they couldn’t interact at all. They avoided it altogether. Imagine that you’ve had a life of going to the firehouse and it’s a second home, a brotherhood, and you go there and it feels like a hostile work environment to you. I had to, in order to get to where I am now today, to examine empathy and how we were more alike than we were different. The fact that I had all this documentation—the incident on the roof was my first major complaint. That’s the complaint I got that got me the right-to-sue letter through HUD. The federal government issued me—I filed a complaint through them. I had a lawyer at the time, Kathryn Dixon, who helped me put that through. Once I had that, it was open season.

Farrell:
Did you know that it was going to be open season leading up to it?

Young:
I had a reputation as taking notes on everything, even from the first day I got to fire college. Everybody talked about my little black book, writing down names and whatnot. I don’t even know where they got that, because I didn’t. But I had such a good memory that if a year later, I had to recall something, I could. I didn’t have to write it down. But the things like that mantel coming out of the window and landing near me, I had to tell the lawyer. Because I could die! Then nobody would know that it had happened before and nobody had done anything about it. And the whole thing of, why didn’t she say anything? Why should she say anything? All these people witnessed this huge hunk of thing coming out of the window, landing near me, could’ve killed me or maimed me. Why wasn’t somebody running up there and smacking somebody around? If I had been a fire officer, I would’ve been yelling my head off and calling the chief and saying, this is fucked up. That’s the kind of manager I was. Either everybody was in on it or everybody there was stupid. Which one do you choose? I don’t get it. But the whole idea of open season, it was open season from the day I entered the fire department. If the belief is, is that you don’t belong, some people will act on that, other people won’t.

There’s all this in between, testing the waters. See how much she’ll take. Will she complain about that? Calling up on the line, me answering it, and then saying something obscene and hanging up. All manner of little jabs, testing my parameter. How can they get in and get to me? If psychological stuff, if the physical stuff didn’t—I left that fire, having had this thing land near me, and I wasn’t shaking and running around hysterical; I was like, wow. Wow.
But it didn’t shake me, and I know that they saw that. Okay, so how do we get to her? Psychological stuff. Obscene phone calls, disobeying, not showing up for work. The first time I was a truck officer—no, it was, that was my first day as lieutenant, was this truck out in the Richmond District. Everybody called in sick. Right? So I got all these people in from other stations. It was bizarre, because I was going to have to work with somebody. It was a protest of sorts. What does that do to you? There’s plenty of women who’ve made a thirty-year career who said, you’ve just got to see them as little boys. Discard it. I’m like, sure. Absolutely. Every fucking shift? Three years’ worth of it? At some point, no.

All right, if you truly don’t have any physical or psychological impact of the stress of that, good on you. But I don’t believe it. I don’t believe it. You’re a human being, not a robot. So documenting things? I had plenty of stories. Plenty of stories. To find a lawyer like Kathryn Dixon, I had to tell them to her. She said, “Okay, I get it.” She got me that right-to-sue letter and then she went on to do another case. She left me and she went to do a class action lawsuit with all the women over at Chevron. It was a big deal. I think they won. But I had no lawyer at that point, so it was sort of moot. If I don’t have anybody to represent me, suing isn’t going to make any sense. By then, I hadn’t been in the firehouse. It took me a month to recuperate, on some level. They wouldn’t grant me disability, so they stopped paying me after a couple weeks. Then Bob found me a job in civil service training, where I didn’t have to put on the uniform. I was able to get back on my feet, but I had just feared the whole prospect of—. And I did come back to life. I worked with a woman, Anne Godfrey, who was very supportive of my situation; but she also saw me as damaged goods. She saw that I was not completely there, and she lived with it. I think we did some good work. I worked with a couple other women. But again, we were doing stuff that was politically edgy. We created a curriculum called Voices and Choices that we would bring in these white-collar women to look at whether or not they wanted to go into the trades. I’m, at that point, not the right person to say, yeah, go into the lion’s den. But I did, because I thought I had to. And I needed the income. At that point, I had a house that I’d bought, I was fixing it up, I had debt up the yin-yang. It’s like, I have to work.

When Bob asked me to run the recruitment, he gave me an option: run the recruitment or run background checks. Background checks would’ve meant I’d work downtown at headquarters. Some part of me was like, oh, man, I don’t want to be downtown. I really don’t. Recruitment, I don’t even know where. I was stationed out of this firehouse on Fell Street. So I said yes. Now, from a worker’s standpoint, I think back on that. He kept me at a lieutenant’s pay, which was wrong; I should’ve been a battalion chief, because a battalion chief supervises that many people and manages that budget. The level of work that I accomplished, given my psychological state, I was still reeling from this. But I wanted a way to keep working and deny that I was suffering. So
here I was in charge of all these young people. I had a great right-hand man. God, what was his name? Hertado, Victor Hertado. This kid, he was a gift from God. He was brand new. And there was another fella who also came in. My whole staff was basically minority. Which people had a problem with. I wasn’t going to recruit white guys. I flat said that. We don’t need to spend any money on these guys. All our money should go to Asian women. We have none. Black women, lesbian and gay people. The idea of targeted recruitment rubbed everybody the wrong way. But it felt like I was still being me, and I was doing the only job I could. But Victor, he immediately called me boss. Whatever I had wanted done, he did it. This guy was amazing. He made me feel like I was, in fact, a manager. Because we would talk about strategy and stuff, and after I grew to trust him—he earned that trust—I never thought twice about talking to him about what was going on. I didn’t spill my guts to him, but he knew. He was all over like, yeah, you’ve been treated badly. Let’s make this work. He had a great work ethic. I hope he’s a chief now; I don’t know whatever happened to him.

But I had a bunch of great people working with me, and I feel like the results were a success. But I was underpaid and not respected by the department in a way. If I had been a battalion chief, I would not have had the interaction problems I did with Vicky Macklin. Bob acknowledged that later. He said, “I should never had put you in a position to have to work with her.” Because she was totally into sabotaging. She did it as a defense mechanism. She was under attack just as much as I was, although I would not say the quality of her job experience was anything close to mine. But she felt the same motivators of survival. She was constantly trying to make me look bad and overworking me. Where are the numbers for that report? You’re not doing, da-da-da. It was like, come down here and do this. Or try to come back to life and come down here and do this. At that point, I was slapping my badge on the table and telling Bob, “You know what? You really aren’t managing this well. I’m completely alone with this, and I’m doing way more than I should be doing. You’re playing to my work ethic and my desire to be important and the identity I have a fire officer; but you’re not respecting me at all.”

And I did, I slapped my badge on the desk, I said, “I fucking quit.” Of course, he took his badge off and slapped it on the desk. He says, “I’m going to quit with you.” Then it became this joke and whatever, like we were in it together. But we weren’t at that point. He was on his trajectory to chief of department. He was an assistant chief, or whatever the rank was administrative-wise, and that’s where he belonged. When I came back and I went back to the Black Firefighters Association, I’m sitting there in a meeting and they’re talking about the bad acting that will always be there and all this stuff. I make a comment about, well, why aren’t we doing this or that. And I’d try to pitch in, in the way that I always was, and he’s like, she’s back. Like I have anything real to give; I don’t. nobody looked at me and said, you are death warmed over. You are so ill, you should be protected. In fact, you need help. I
should’ve been hospitalized. Now, I’m not pointing a finger and saying they failed me. They didn’t know what to do. I was the first. I was a test case. I was uncharted territory every time I went to work. I was the one who pushed myself. Bob coming to my house after I had—my partner at the time, I don’t know if she called him or what, but I hadn’t gotten out of bed in a week. I’d go to the bathroom, obviously, but I wasn’t eating; I was just laying there in a ball, all right? I should’ve been in the hospital getting fluids pumped, having somebody talk to me, getting this stuff. I was just completely alone with it. He came to my house and just sort of sat there tentatively, while I mumbled and rattled on about nothing. This whole idea of, what was I going to do? I think we ended up going horseback riding. He kept saying, “Is there anything—?” He was trying to get me out of the house. I don’t know what got me in the mind of it, but I said, “Let’s go to Half Moon Bay and ride horses.” We did. We hopped in his car, went to Half Moon Bay and rented horses. I got on that thing and I rode the hell out of it. He didn’t really like horses. Maybe he told you this story.

Farrell: No, he didn’t.

02-01:26:02
Young: Yeah. I think in his mind, he felt he succeeded. He succeeded in getting me out of the house, but I was so far from being well. I was getting used up and nobody really—everybody had their head down and was moving forward. I presented as somebody who was surviving. I wasn’t going to let people see that they had gotten to me. This is a coping mechanism that a lot of women take. I never, ever criticized a woman’s coping mechanism. Years later, I couldn’t criticize the men’s, either. I saw how afraid a lot of them were. But the idea of not showing that you’d been gotten to was tried and true. Acting like one of the guys was something people did. What I did was the opposite of coping. I was constantly on the frontline, because I thought that I had no choice. Once you’re out there, you can’t go back. Everybody sees you that way, and you might as well stay out there. I kept having this naïve—and it was naïve—belief that the next day would be different, even though I wouldn’t leave the room of the officer who I was covering for in a shift. I would just sit in there eating junk food and watching TV. I gained a lot of weight, I wasn’t working out. Then when I had the nervous breakdown and I stopped eating, it was just this horrible no-self-care period of time. Nobody knew, except for my partner, because she witnessed it. I don’t even think my friends knew. What do you do with that? You can’t help, if you don’t know it’s needed. So by the time I got to this thing of a right-to-sue letter or knowing that this had happened.

I don’t know why the mantel falling out of the window was excused, in a way, because it started me thinking that whole thing of we all have each other’s backs at a fire may not be true. That could’ve been an accident, but the push wasn’t. It’s like, I will never fit in. I will never have a place here. This is how bad it can get. At that point, I didn’t have the loyalty to them anymore. I
didn’t have the, give them a chance; things can be different or turn around, or my work ethic will somehow miraculously change their opinion of me. All that left. The idea that I would have to use—I couldn’t work. Then I was back at the firehouse and I still couldn’t work, but I was working with all these young people and they didn’t like me either, because by then, I was hell on wheels. I was so controlling. It must’ve been really horrible to work with [me]. I had people leave my shift because I was just micromanaging to the nth degree, because everything had to be perfect. Nothing bad could happen on my watch. But then I had this Captain Serrano, who was supportive of me, and Jim Lang was my chief in that district, on my shift. The perfect opportunity to be mentored, but by then, I was completely incapable of taking advantage of it. I tried. I tried. But the moment anything happened, I had no resilience. I had broken my stress management system, sort of like heatstroke. If you have heatstroke, which can kill you, you break your internal thermostat. If you survive it, from that point forward, you can never overheat again, because—. In fact, it’s worse; you’re more likely to die. It’s the stress thermostat. I took the captains exam. This is back when I had gotten to Station 33 and I was, day to day, working. I didn’t have the same horrible experience of PTSD going to work there. It felt like a safe place. We had a lot of medical calls, which I had no problem with at all. They were horrific. We worked in a gang territory, so we had a lot of shootings and did a lot of CPR. There was an older community there, too. It was an active house. But I was just constantly stressed out. Constantly stressed out at work, to make things perfect and directing these people. And they didn’t like it, and I don’t blame them.

Farrell: At what point did you say, enough is enough and I’m done, that’s it?

Young: When I got the right-to-sue letter—and it has an expiration date; I don’t remember how long it was, but—I thought, I really didn’t feel myself being there. I took the captains’ exam and it was like night and day. I couldn’t even function. I didn’t even get through the test. I barely studied. Well, the study materials had harassing material in it, the photographs. I think I mentioned that. I open up the study materials and there are these photographs of rooftops in the Mission, where you’re supposed to identify fire prevention hazards and list them, right? The parapet wall had all this graffiti on it. In the middle of the photograph, in large letters, was the word “bitch.” I’m the only woman taking the exam, and here’s a photograph that says bitch. I came apart. I marched those materials downtown and I said, “What the fuck is this?” I was so mad. I’m showing it to Bob. I’ll tell you what, people’s response felt lukewarm to me.

That’s when I realized they thought I was hysterical. What are you reading into this? Oh, okay. And here’s this woman’s face, looking at you in a way—it’s like a hair salon. Everything. Everything seemed—it was crazy. I felt hysterical. I didn’t like it. But the word “bitch” was just—there was no way around that. I didn’t study well, I didn’t do well; but all of a sudden I’m at 33,
and getting called out as a captain. I often thought, why now? I’m so far down the list, why would they want to do that? I thought, here I was getting back on my feet at 33. I’d been there for however long it was—a year, maybe two, I’m not sure—and I’m functioning. Let’s fuck with her again. The moment they started sending me out as a captain, I started having a relapse. I couldn’t function. I’d vomit, I’d shake, I’d panic. The idea of saying, “I don’t want to go out as captain anymore” didn’t enter my mind, because that would’ve been showing them that they’d gotten to me. I didn’t have a choice there, either.

Ooh. At no point, did anybody step in and say, listen, you don’t have to do this. Hang on to what you have here. Try to hang on, because the fight is a lot further down the line, too. I don’t know, everybody else is in survival mode? I don’t know what it was. But that was the beginning of the end. I pursued getting a lawyer for the suit at that point. I saw that I was going to become one of those guys, like the black men who found a house, that didn’t do much, and that I couldn’t. I thought, you’ve been changed forever. You don’t even want to go out as a captain. Oh my God. That’s it, it’s happened. As frantic as I was at controlling things, I didn’t have the same work ethic.

I found an attorney, Francis Pinnock, and she started deposing people. The day that she called my firehouse, which she shouldn’t have done. She shouldn’t have called me at the firehouse to tell me that they had deposed Chris Emmons. And she told me what Chris Emmons had said. Chris Emmons was a woman firefighter who was stationed at Engine 11. Don Sheppler, I believe, was the guy that tried to push me. He’s at 11. 11 was notorious for bragging about and just being very vocal of their sexist, racist stuff. They were bad actors. I knew a woman who was trying to become a firefighter. She owned the house next door to that station, and they would sit out in their backyard and they would hear these guys talking. She would tell me, “You can’t believe what they were talking about!” I’m like, “I can.”

Well, Chris went back to the firehouse that night, after the fire—or that morning, excuse me—the fire where I was pushed. I hadn’t told a soul. These guys were bragging about it. They were bragging about having tried to push me off the roof. She heard them and she said as much in her deposition. From that moment on, when Francis read it to me, I literally just shut down and knew that it was an affirmation, and it was also, it could happen again. Here’s the thing, is that it’s ironic because towards the end, before I had my nervous breakdown, I was constantly thinking about ways in which I could get killed and look like it had been in the line of duty, so that I would have some measure of dignity. How can I make this happen? Commit suicide, basically. I thought about it a lot. It was crazy. Or at least get injured, so that I could have a disability and not be too badly maimed or—it occupied my mind. It was an escape. But it was a very sick escape. But here I was like, they could kill me, push me off a roof, and I didn’t want that to happen. I told Jim Lang I had to leave. I said, “I’m sick. I’ve got to go.” That was the last time I was in the firehouse. It’s the middle of the shift. I don’t even know what I did. I’m
feeling like there’s nothing you can do. You’re not really sick, but you’ve called in sick. You’re not even playing hooky, you’re just completely unmoored. I had disconnected from the fire service at that point because I’d left the firehouse. When people, years later, would say, oh, yeah, you quit, oh, I wanted to belt them. I literally physically wanted to just knock that word back through their teeth. I said, “I didn’t quit.” We could probably debate that all day long. But I, in my heart, know that I didn’t quit. The whole idea of fighting to the death—that’s the thing, is a firefighter goes to work not knowing whether they’re going to trade their life so that someone else can live. It’s always, it’s always on the table. I wasn’t going to die. But I was, in fact, dying. I wished I could have connected it in that way, and seen it for what it was. But believe me, I felt like I had let everybody down. That’s what I felt. What I had to focus on now was financial security.

I say that, and that’s not entirely true, because I really wanted to punish these people. I wanted to expose them. It was like a dying gasp of the advocate, of the fighter that I was. All right, you fuckers, I’m going to take my pound of flesh and I’m going to expose you for what you are. But I had an exit strategy. I bought a small motor home. I knew that this was going to happen. Before I lost my income, I was going to use credit and buy this thing. I took a train down to wherever it was where I had seen this RV, and I wrote a list of the pros and cons of filing the lawsuit. At the top of the pro was justice. Now, if you think that I couldn’t be any more naïve, after everything I’d been through, writing that as the number one reason to do it was the height of it. But I didn’t know how it yet. I don’t know how it yet. All the cons were health related, financial, living without an income. I lost my home. I lost everything. I lost everything because I had no money. I barely hung on.

This is when I thought I had to pay my creditors. I had to blah-blah-blah. I kept afloat paying the minimum for my credit cards, but my house, there was nothing I could do about, and make the payments on that RV, which was going to be my escape hatch. I started thinking about how much money I would make from the lawsuit, and at the same time, take these guys down. Like somehow, exposure of just how bad it was in the firehouse and the results of what happened to me would change things, like it wouldn’t be in vain. All the depositions, all of the time sitting there listening to these men lie, all of the work I had to do to prepare for the lawsuit, losing everything while I was doing it, it was just—I went into a weird fog. I was drinking a little bit, but I wasn’t drinking to the point of getting drunk. I don’t know what I was trying to do, but somehow I made it through. I don’t know how I did. I couldn’t tell you. The things that motivate me still to this day are doing a job well. If I decide this is my job, or I believe this, whatever it is that’s in front of me is my job, that’s what I’m going to do. The lawsuit became my job.
The trial, three months of it, was hell. It was absolute hell. We were in this makeshift courtroom because the courthouse was being earthquake proofed or whatever, so I was like twenty feet away from the jury. They stared at me all day long. I was on the stand for three weeks. The liars’ parade. And the fact that my life was in the hands of these people I couldn’t read. There were all these elements. It would make a great movie, I guess, or story, just the trial itself. I think the trial itself would encapsulate everything that happened to me. There’d have to be these flashbacks to what actually took place. There would have to be the drama of public opinion in the jury’s eyes, all these women. There was a black woman on the jury who was working-class and a trade worker, who thought I was a wimp. That was her take on me. I looked at her as an ally, but she was like, what are you complaining about, bitch? She never said that, until I heard about it afterwards, that she didn’t think I should get awarded anything. Now, why? Why would the cultural pressure on her have her listen to my story for three months and have her say, what are you whining about? This woman who stared holes in me, this middle-aged woman, or maybe slightly older, old as my mom, just looking at me. I’m thinking, she hates me. I couldn’t get it out of my head that she hates me. No other thought would enter my mind. But the moment the jury was dismissed, she got up and she went to the back of the courtroom where my mother sat every single day, and she hugged her [she’s crying] and said, “We try so hard to protect them and we can’t.” She was a mother, and what I saw on her face was pain every day. Pain. She knew that was my mother sitting behind me.

Farrell: Do you want to take a break?

Young: No. I just want to finish this thought about everything. If you look at everything as containing everything, my life in that courtroom or in that trial, this idea of why we’re here, what this is about, the evolution of our soul, whatever it is, it all happened then. I came out the other side. They found in my favor. They gave me a fraction of what I was worth, but it was enough to allow me to recover. I lived on that money for about six years, which—$300,000. It enabled me to recover to a point where I’m sitting here, how many years later, and my story is being recorded. I can’t tell you how profound this is to me in the scheme of things, from talking about my life. My life is recorded in that courtroom, and now here it is recorded for an oral history project that other people, if they are inclined, will know. They can identify with me, they can call me a whiner, they can do whatever; but it’s a part of the fabric of human existence. This struggle is the human struggle. It truly is. There’s no way around it. That’s why we’re here. I don’t know what everybody on that jury’s story is. I don’t know what motivated them to think what they did about me, if they thought I was worth something or not. But it’s like a dream. All the characters in it are an aspect of you. The moment I could see myself as these men and not see as an “us” and “them.”
That’s what I have struggled with since I left and that six years it took me to keep from killing myself, and finding a place in the world, and searching out a deeper spiritual connection, and working through my anger. I spent a lot of that money on therapy. I still had a will to live, obviously. I’m still here, obviously. I still bear the effects of this. But I have a perspective now that I could never have had, a perspective about life I could never have had, without having had that experience. I’m more human because of it, because I understand how human it is. When I think about Nelson Mandela getting out of prison, and then the way in which to heal South African pain was to have everybody sit down and talk about—I would never assume that somebody like Don Sheppler or Frank Blackburn would sit with me and we could have a frank talk about it; but you know what? I would love to. I’m capable of it now. Whether it happens with them or not, I’m capable of sitting down and saying, wait a minute, your anger is the surface; your ideas about who you are and who I am are not what this is about. Are you willing to explore deeper? I’m not going to tell you what you think; I’m going to share with you my experience, and you share with me yours. I thought I would never go back into political work or advocacy work at all, ever. I said, “I’ve done my time in the trenches. Never going back there.” But when I moved to Portland and I got involved with an alliance called the Metropolitan Alliance for the Common Good, through a church up there, Saint Andrew’s, I found myself doing political organizing around relational work. Saul Alinsky’s model, Back of the Yards, where everything is about the relationship. What bonds us together, not what’s different. How are we ultimately all affected by poverty or lack of access to housing or education or healthcare? It was liberating, because in the same way—.

The first thing to happen to me after I left and I survived that summer, I went and moved to Moab and I became a river guide. Which was crazy, but I did it. Every day that I went on that river, I was terrorized by that fact that somebody could get killed. Right? But I was facilitating a good time, not a crisis. And I got my body back. What it showed me was that the qualities that made me a good leader and somebody who could connect deeply with other people and help them, even in this very simple way as a river guide, that those qualities were there when I went into the fire service. They didn’t leave when I left. I didn’t leave them there. I had them, they were intact. I got my body back, I got my spirit back. I still had PTSD and I had to be very careful about that; but for the most part, I was alive again. Then I entered the spiritual realm. I was forced, in a bunch of different instances, to look deeper. I’d been launched from this experience and I had to integrate what happened into my life. Otherwise it would haunt me. I started looking at Eastern teachings, Catholicism, looking at the role that that would play. I was willing to. I was a very different person, within five years. Moving up to the Pacific Northwest and starting the political organizing, I realized that that was always going to be a part of me, as well. The idea of justice. It wasn’t a naïve idea of justice, it was just, this is simply what you do and this is your motivator. It wasn’t
something I was going to get. I didn’t get it from that trial. Not a single person that I named was punished. Nothing. They didn’t come out of pocket, they didn’t lose their pensions, they didn’t lose their rank.

And the press didn’t vilify them. The liars’ parade was certainly a mouthful, but it didn’t— I don’t know. Stuff’s still happening today in the fire department. It hasn’t gone away. It points to the place where something could change. I had dreams—I would have them reoccurring—where I was back in the firehouse. I couldn’t believe I was back there. Right? Here I am. I couldn’t shake the feeling that I’d actually somehow been rehired, that it was true. And every time I woke up, I was devastated by the truth. That happened more often than the horrific kind of fire dreams. I had dreams where I caught fire and was burning. Fire figured prominently. I had dreams where I was a chief, directing a big fire, and everybody respected me. I had dreams that acted out my worst fears and acted out my best wishes. A lot of that. I have far fewer of them now. But if someone were to come up to me—and this was actually a possibility. They said, you could be a consultant. You could talk to people about integration. You could help a fire department integrate its department. I believe I could. I believe I could use what happened to me effectively, and not be triggered, because I would obviously have the support of—. Would that ever happen? No. Would they offer me the job to go down and run the division of training in San Francisco? Mm-mm. A snowball’s chance in hell. But would I do it, could I do it? I have no idea, but I know enough. I have enough under my belt, the knowledge of what actually happens, the principles and the practice, that I could have an effect.

But at this point in the game, would I be willing to risk what sanity and measure of health I have left? No. No. I know that I cannot do that. Do I want to? Yes. That will never stop being true. Do I want an income commensurate with everything I went through? Do I want a thirty-year pension? Yes. I do. I really do. I’m not poor. I don’t suffer from that level of poverty. I’ve made my life work. But it is meager. I think about worth and value, I don’t tie it to money, if I look at what I’m able to accomplish in my relationships, the service work that I do. And I do a fair amount. It’s very important to me to feel that purpose and contribution. But I don’t feel anything even remotely like the respect that I would feel if I had been a chief. The measurement of that, that’s still kind of the yardstick, sad but true. And that I could tell people I’m a retired firefighter. I have this badge in my wallet. But that’s risky, too because then they ask questions. How long were you in? Where did you work? Did you know so-and-so? I know what I know.

Farrell: Did you find that you got a lot of the respect and the fulfillment that you were looking for with the political organizing in Portland?

02-01:55:11 Young: Oh, I was definitely a part of a community up there. I loved it. There’s a very big difference in the quality, the texture of respect in a paramilitary or military
institution. There’s an affirmation. It’s like trying to undo that I’m-going-to-kill-somebody, somebody’s-going-to-get-killed thing. No. If you become a chief and people look to you, it’s kind of—I’ve had people say it’s a past life thing, that I was some commander and that I’ll still trying to regain that sense of stature. It is a stature. I think people respect my work ethic now. I think they see the contributions that I give. I’m thanked and admired for those things. But I’m not a chief. I’m not that thing. If I had never pursued the fire department, I probably wouldn’t want that, or understand what it is I want. That’s what I meant to say, is that I would want that, but I wouldn’t understand why. I may have gotten it in some other corporate thing, the leader. It’s sort of like our measure of success. If I had been seen as a former CEO of or—I don’t know what it is about that level of power or acknowledging that power, the title. It sounds kind of petty and superficial, but it’s not. There’s something about the completion of that. I would settle for a retirement banquet and the true, true stature of a retirement banquet for somebody who had put in thirty years, did their duty. The fact that women still get harassed and booted out of the department and all this stuff, it feels like I didn’t do my duty. I might’ve started the ball rolling, but somebody else would’ve come along to do this. I’m not unique in that. It happened to be me. I was willing to be the first. Believe me, I was shocked when other women took the lieutenants’ test later on down the like. It was like, after everything I’ve been through, really? They had their own level of denial and coping. You know that there are women in there and they got supported in the way that they did. I don’t know, maybe it has nothing to do with gender anymore; it’s if you can put up with it. I don’t know.

Farrell: Having come out the other side and having done so much during your time with the department, and kind of looking towards the future, what are your hopes for the integration and the diversity in the department?

Young: I think attrition really plays a big role in this. Nostalgia for days gone by will keep that old boy mentality alive to a certain degree. Now with our new president, we’re expressing bigotry and sexism out loud in a leadership role. There’ll be a backlash. 9/11 caused a backlash back to the use of the term fireman. Which sounds really tiny. It’s not. The image of woman as hero has been contested for a long, long time. So it’s not just the fire department that’s got to change. Our culture and the idea of women’s role in it. The idea that women will be respected and nourished and just that it will be normal, that’s what I wish. Everything will follow from that. Everybody’s life matters. The idea of taking somebody and enslaving them and then having all the power to enslave them, then set them free, them minister to them; but all the time thinking of them as less than and treating them as less than. You’re not going to come out the other side with empowered and functioning culture. The same thing is true of women. We’re talking on a much longer time scale here. The African American experience of all the time they’ve been in this country, three-quarters of it they’ve been enslaved in one way or another. So this anger
and everything that’s happening. Now, if women started rising up in the same way, if there was the kind of—I don’t know what’s going to happen now. Talk about open season. Everybody, let’s take a moment and think about how much are you willing to sacrifice. Or you can’t deny your denial anymore. If you turn your back and just focus on your own life at this point, you’re never going to not know you’re doing that. You’re just not.

It would’ve been much easier to do that with [Hillary] Clinton, right? It was easy to do with [Barack] Obama. Everybody in that system has blood on their hands. Everybody in the fire department has people’s wellbeing and the lack of care on their hands. It’s institutionalized. We’re forced as a culture to live in this world and be complicit on some level. Otherwise you don’t get to function. Same thing is true. It is a microcosm of society. So do I want the fire department to be integrated? Only if people want to work there. I would never force somebody to do it because we have to have ethnic diversity. I don’t know. So to say that I want the fire department to become something else other than it is—. It’s on its way. It’s cyclical. It’s like planetary time, as opposed to human time.

How long should it take for this to happen in the evolution of our species? If you wanted to talk about it in evolutionary terms, I went on a hike with this woman who still does diversity training for the military, right? She’s a subcontractor. She’s yakking away to me about talking to these generals, because women are raped in the military every single day. All right? Harassed every single day. And she’s talking about how to teach these generals, the leaders, about respect and—these are leaders, okay? It is absolutely not going to translate down, right? I told her, I said, “There’s only one way in which to effectively change what’s happening, and that’s to kill the alpha.” Well, she almost fell off the trail. I said, “Think about it. If I had gone to work and I knew who was stirring the shit up and I knew that the bulk of the men working there—.” To admit to this thinking, this doesn’t sound that enlightened. But I’m talking about evolution, survival. Survival and how to stop something from happening. This is tried and true, just like divide and conquer. If I had put a little bit of transmission fluid in this alpha male’s coffee and he went home sick, all the other guys could relax. Some of them, I might actually have been able to interact with. There were the alphas, the wannabe alphas, and then the people that just, in their silence, were complicit because they had to fit in. If they were left to their own devices, they might make up their own mind. I met some guys who actually were honest about that. They said, hey, I worked with you a couple shifts; you’re okay. But don’t ask me to say that in front of anybody. All right?

I met gay men in the department. This is before any of the men came out. Said, I really applaud you getting in the Pride parade, but don’t ask me to come out. I’m like, fine. But if the women in that position who were assaulted were not afraid of losing their jobs, and they just basically just killed this guy in their sleep, or disabled him, things would calm down. Now, somebody else
would try to rise to be the alpha, but it would take them a little time. And away they’d go, too. Now, here’s the nice way of doing it, is the commanding officer goes in and identifies those guys. Because if you’ve read any of Malcolm Gladwell’s stuff, and even some of the other studies, the cops that are the brutalizers, the ones that perpetrate most of the awful stuff, they do it repeatedly. They’re repeat offenders. They have multiple complaints against them, and everybody is silent about their behavior. You take that one person out and get rid of them, things shake down. Somebody else comes to the surface, you get rid of them as they show up. Other people notice that, and it stops. But these guys, they’re not willing to vilify somebody. They’re not willing to figuratively or literally kill somebody for the good, the common good, the survival of our species. It’s backfiring, this whole idea of survival. This old-school network is surviving because these alphas keep diversity out. We’re hardwired to kill what is not like us. You’re not going to override that in a generation or two. It’s just not going to happen. Anything that supports that survival mechanism, it’s going to keep it very much alive. It’s going to be like building a sandcastle at the edge of the surf.

So you remove those people from the equation, you allow other people to establish themselves, then you see what happens. Obviously, you have a supportive institution, with—it’s not even about guidelines of behavior, because people will gravitate towards decency, if they’re not pressured into choosing a side. I’ll tell you what, it works both ways. My good friend in Oakland said, “We’ll know we succeeded when they start hiring women we don’t like.” I learned that when I worked with women who, they were not competent. Just like I worked with a black man who was lazy, who fit what my brother was saying, or these other guys were saying, these women don’t know shit. And I’ll tell you what, I wanted to kill her. I felt that fury. How dare you get into this job and not know what you’re doing. You don’t have the luxury of being half-assed. Or tiny or whatever it was. I became just as bad as those men. When I say bad, I don’t mean moralistically, I mean my judgment was highly motivating. The thing I was capable of doing was giving the benefit of the doubt and trying to train. But if I couldn’t train somebody and they truly were just trying to scam, then I’d disappoint them. I had a guy like that at 33, and he happened to be a black man, and I took him on. I got a lot of heat from the other black men. I said, “Lo and behold, you’re men first, black second.” Because I had been a part of the Black Firefighters Association, I was supposed to look the other way when somebody paid somebody else to work for them, somebody who I counted on as a worker, part of my crew. I couldn’t ever know that they were able to do their job, because they were never there during the day. That was a big problem for me.

I remember by the time I got back to 33, I was the incredible micromanager. Rules and tools. I think I was effective, but it was miserable to work for me unless you enjoyed rules and tools. I had people that liked working with me, too. I can’t say that everybody hated me. But it was hard. It was really hard. I
had a standard for performance just as much as those white guys, and it didn’t matter to me whether you were ethnic or female. If you didn’t meet the standard, I wasn’t going to put up with it. You know what was funny is when I filed charged on this guy and I wanted to have him disciplined, I had these white guys that weren’t all that happy about me warm up to me. Here I was. Here I was again, with that choice. Oh, okay. The white guys would say “You do see that black people are lazy?” It’s like, no, this guy is not doing his job. I don’t know why he’s exhibiting these things. Then the black men that would come—he paid a black man to slash my tires. So it was bizarre to me that they were going to try to smoke me out. I just thought it was crazy. It was crazy-making. There was nowhere to turn. But had I been able to stick it out and stayed there, who knows what could’ve happened? I might’ve found my way. I might’ve survived, if I had said I’m not going out as a captain, I’m just going to stay here and I’m going to see what happens. I don’t know. I’m not going to file a lawsuit; I don’t care what happened. If I had chosen not to do the lawsuit, if I had said, listen, that was a learning curve; I’ll never put myself in that position again, I don’t know if I could’ve replenished. That’s the thing I think about, the choices. Here’s the turning point. If I hadn’t [been] promoted, or if I had taken Postel’s offer, because I still would’ve been on that list. I doubt I would’ve gotten promoted, even in the next wave. But who knows? If I had blah-blah-blah. I would’ve been a tough officer. I would’ve been more like Blackburn, I think. But I also think that I would’ve been fairer.

When I think about the manager I became later on. I tried to do jobs after I left the fire department. I gave my best shot. And I had some good ones. Eventually, just the stress, any stress at all, would just wear me down. No matter what I did to take care of myself, I ended up sick. That’s when I realized that I truly was disabled on some level. Which was a hard realization to make. You’re physically and psychologically altered. I’ve stopped comparing myself to other people. At this point, I just live the life that I have. Which ultimately, for as long as I live, it’s got the fabric of all the things I’ve done, not just the fire department. That’s the perspective I’ve gained, is that was a part of my life; it’s not the entirety of it. Everything I’ve learned is still coming into play. But I also see the effects of it. I struggle with insecurity. I still struggle with things, and I would like to resolve that. If I were to wish for one thing to be removed from the equation for the fire department to function, [it] would be that uncertainty and insecurity. That there would be measures taken so that somebody knew exactly where they stood. For that to be true, so much else has to change.

Farrell: Well, I appreciate you taking the time to reflect on this experience and sharing your story. Before we wrap up, is there anything else that you want to add?

02-02:12:26 Young: I don’t know if I said this in the first session, but there were plenty of times when I should’ve said no. One of them was when my lawyer said in order for me to win the lawsuit, I had to paint everybody with the same brush. There
were plenty of men in that department that were good to me. They were honest, decent men with good work ethics, and they saw in me the same thing, and I was able to connect with them. That I was harassed, that doesn’t change it. But during the trial, I had to make it sound like everybody was an asshole, and I regret that deeply. I’m sure that these guys might know that that’s what was required. When I promoted, I got a postcard from somebody who was an old-timer saying, “Congratulations. You did a good job.” There was evidence of support for me there, which makes me ache for if I had focused on that instead of what was going on, maybe I couldn’t stood it. I don’t know. I don’t know what I was truly capable of because I was using myself up. I was letting myself get used up. I didn’t pace myself, I guess is what it is. But I regret that everybody in the department was painted in the same light, because it’s not true. The effect that that experience had on my relationship with my older brother was profound, as well. My whole sense of family or community, trying to come back from the standard that I hold anybody to—I won’t ever have the relationship I could have. More than the career, there are other things that are unattainable now, because of what happened. I’d like to think that everyone could rise above it, but it’s really not possible. There’s a level of trauma that makes it almost impossible to trust. So the loss keeps going. The perspective helps, in terms of how I cope, but I want to end on a much more positive note than that.

Young: I think the fire department can be a healthy organization. I think it can be integrated in a way that’s not just about ethnic or gender. Because it’s the kind of public service that you have the opportunity to be completely human. When you have a gun strapped to your hip, you have to have a distance that never really goes away. As a firefighter or paramedic, the whole point is to connect. I think that an integrated department is one that connects the people that need help with the ones that can provide it, and everybody on that team is connected. That’s my definition of health, regardless of who’s on the team. I think that if you have that level of connection, the other follows as a matter of course. I’d like to think that we would all strive for that level of connection and honest. It’s certainly pointed me in that direction. In my life now, it’s a priority for me. I can still have fun; I’m not super deep all the time. I can party with the rest of the people. But ultimately, to have friendships or to be human means that, means to connect. Yeah. And I’ll keep doing that. That won’t ever change. So in a sense, I’m a better human being because of the experience. That whole thing of what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger, it’s proven out too many times. But it’s also part of who I am to take that and work with it. I can’t tell you how grateful I am that this history is documented before I leave this planet or whatever, that this will be known on some level by other people. If they can draw some hope or answers to questions from it, or start to question things because of it, then I guess my career as a firefighter will continue to live on.
Farrell: I think so, yeah. I think that people will have a lot to learn from you and be quite inspired by everything that you’ve done. So thank you so much for your time. This has truly been an honor to sit down with you for this.

02-02:18:03
Young: Thank you. All right, you’re welcome.

Farrell: Thank you.

[End of Interview]