

NATIONAL OCEANIC AND ATMOSPHERIC ADMINISTRATION
VOICES ORAL HISTORY ARCHIVES
IN PARTNERSHIP WITH NOAA HERITAGE AND THE NATIONAL WEATHER SERVICE

AN INTERVIEW WITH LINDA LAWHORN-BROWN
FOR THE
NOAA 50th ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

INTERVIEW CONDUCTED BY
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SILVER SPRING, MARYLAND
DECEMBER 6, 2019

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Molly Graham: This begins an oral history interview with Linda Lawhorn-Brown for the NOAA 50th Oral History Project. The interview is taking place on December 6, 2019, in Silver Spring, Maryland. The interviewer is Molly Graham. We'll start at the beginning. Could you say when and where you born?

Linda Lawhorn-Brown: I was born in Ridgeway, South Carolina, on May 23, 1958. I'm sixty-one years old.

MG: Can you tell me about your family history and how they came to settle in that area?

LLB: Both parents are from two small towns that are about six miles apart in South Carolina. We ended up in D.C. because my mom moved here for better work opportunities in the early '70s. She liked it here. We had other relatives that had already moved here, and she liked the area. So we came to live here.

MG: Can you describe the town that you grew up in?

LLB: It's a very small town, and still is. Everybody knows everybody. So you drive down the road, everybody's waving. [laughter] When I first took my husband there for a visit, he asked, "Do you know everybody here?" I said, "No, it's just the way people are in the South." I'm sure you may have heard that people are very hospitable in the South, and they really are. I love that about the South, and always cherish that, and always call it home. Although I've been living here since high school, I still call it home.

MG: Was your father's family from that area as well?

LLB: Yes, both families – two small towns six miles apart. My dad's town, Ridgeway, is even smaller than my mom's town, Winnsboro. Ridgeway has one street light, one little main street in town. Winnsboro is much bigger. But still, both small compared to cities. My mother and my father divorced, and my dad moved to Charlotte, North Carolina. She came to D.C.

MG: How old were you when your mother moved to D.C.?

LLB: When she came to D.C., I was probably five. We stayed with her parents until she got her feet here, and then me and my sisters moved with her.

MG: On your survey, you said your sisters had done some –

LLB: Ancestry.

MG: – some genealogy research.

LLB: Yes.

MG: What did you discover?

LLB: Well, I actually wasn't surprised because we have a great grandmother on my mom's side, and her husband was white. So I thought we got to have roots somewhere else. [laughter] So England is what came up. It was thirty percent. So we're thirty percent something in England. I forgot exactly what the term was. The rest of it was East Africa and two percent Native American. It was very interesting, but not surprised to hear that.

MG: Did you ever find out more about that relationship?

LLB: Not yet, but we plan on doing that. That might be something I'll do in retirement.

MG: Good. Tell me about how life changed for you when you moved to D.C.

LLB: It was definitely a culture shock because life is so much slower in the South, and the personalities are different. The schools were different. People were telling us, when we first came here, that we would be behind the scale as far as the learning curve. But when we got into school, we found that to be quite different. It was just the opposite. So it worked out well.

MG: You moved to D.C. during an interesting time in United States history. This would be during the Civil Rights Movement and lots of social and cultural changes. Did you witness or participate in any of the movements of the time? You were fairly young.

LLB: Yes, but even our little small towns in South Carolina, during that time, we went to school – once the schools integrated, we were all there together. Never really had any issues with racism or anything like that, I think, because these two towns are small and quaint, and like I said, everybody knew each other, everybody looked out for each other. That village thing is just so true in the South. So, no, I never really have experienced that in the South. When I came, of course, to D.C., I certainly did not.

MG: You have four sisters.

LLB: Yes, four sisters.

MG: Are they older or younger?

LLB: I'm in the middle. I'm the middle child. Two younger and two older. [laughter]

MG: Tell me what it's like to grow up with four sisters.

LLB: It was awesome. We're still very, very close to this day. We all protected each other. Very, very close-knit family. I think that's because of the way our parents – things that our parents taught us, and the family values that were instilled when we were children in the South. We held on to that.

MG: Can you tell more about your education growing up, the schools you attended, and things that stand out to you?

LLB: The schools here – I went to an inner-city high school in D.C. It didn't have the best reputation. It didn't really prepare me adequately for college, but we had a really good – at the time, they called them guidance counselors. They may call them something else now, but the guidance counselor is who you would go see your last year of high school. She prepped you for the SATs [Scholastic Assessment Test] and all of that. I really appreciated her for what she did do. Nowadays, kids have a lot more things, and they start testing, I think, in middle school now.

MG: What was the high school you attended?

LLB: Cardozo High School in Northwest Washington, D.C.

MG: Describe that neighborhood a little bit.

LLB: It was a school on the hill. Back in the early '70s, most of D.C. was black, so it was a black community. There were actually a lot of seniors that lived in the community where the school was. I remember that. I remember seeing a lot of seniors in the area, and my mom telling me that it's a real senior community. I liked that.

MG: You moved in with your grandparents when you moved to D.C. What was that experience like?

LLB: My mother moved here. Both sets of grandparents lived in South Carolina. We lived with my grandparents in South Carolina. When my parents divorced, we stayed there in South Carolina with my mother's parents. My mom moved here, and my father went to Charlotte. We still got to see them both, but we later followed my mom here to D.C.

MG: How long were you apart from your mother?

LLB: I guess it was from when I was five to high school. It was for about ten years. But she would come home all the time, bring us things, and we'd go to D.C. for summer. Every summer, we came here.

MG: I'm sorry. I've gotten confused. You went to high school in D.C.

LLB: Right.

MG: How old were you when you moved to D.C.?

LLB: First year of high school. I was fourteen.

MG: That's what I missed, sorry about that.

LLB: Sorry about that. That was the ten years. From the time that we moved with my grandmother when I was five or six, until tenth grade for me, my first year of high school.

MG: Were you close with your grandparents?

LLB: Yes.

MG: Tell me about them. What stories did they share with you? What were they like?

LLB: They went to church all the time. They dragged us to church, [laughter] which was good. I appreciate that. In hindsight now, I'm so glad I got that. I did not enjoy it so much all the time, as much as they went. I loved it. It was a lot of gardening. We helped with that. I liked that. We had a cow. My grandmother milked the cow. I was too young to milk the cow, but I would always stand there and watch. We didn't really live on a farm, but we did have gardens. We had lots of fruit trees – plums and peaches and pears and apples and figs. You name it, and we had it. We really lived off the land because we had chickens, also. A good part of that time was living off the land when I was younger and living with my grandparents. We have a lot of fond memories – playing around the house, a bunch of girls in the house. One of my mother's sisters, her daughter, was there also. So it was not just the five of us. It was some other cousins there also. My mom and my grandmother had babies the same year, which was me and my aunt, Mildred. So my aunt with raised with us. She's like a sister, too. She still lives in South Carolina.

MG: It sounds like a great experience growing up in that area.

LLB: Yes, and we didn't have a whole lot of toys. We certainly didn't have handhelds, but we had a lot of fun. We played outside most of the time. It didn't get very cold in South Carolina. So we loved the country. We loved being able to play outside. We loved helping in the garden. We had a good upbringing.

MG: How did you feel about moving to D.C.? Was it hard to leave?

LLB: No, because by that time, we really wanted to be with our mom. We were teenagers. She said, "Yeah, it's time to get them so I can be with my girls." It was fun. We enjoyed the move. It was a big adjustment, though. Just like I said, the personalities and getting to know how people are here. It was a big adjustment.

MG: What was your mother doing for work when you came?

LLB: My mother was a surgical supply technician at Holy Cross Hospital here in Silver Spring for about fifteen years.

MG: Wow. Did she ever remarry?

LLB: No, she never remarried. And my dad never remarried. You would think they were together because whenever we would all end up at home in South Carolina together, they still talked like they were together – "This is my wife Dorothy." [laughter] It's very interesting that – a lot of people in the South, although some of them separated, they never divorced on paper. That was my parents. They never divorced on paper. I don't know. They were always friends. I think that helped us, too, as children, knowing there was no hostility and seeing them introduce

each other still as husband and wife, knowing they weren't really because they hadn't lived together for years – it was an interesting setup.

MG: In high school, what were you finding you were most interested in or excelled at?

LLB: Yes. English. I think that was my best subject. A lot of times I think it has to do with the teacher, too. I really had a really good English teacher. So I think that's what made me really have the interest in it also. So I loved English. Although, when I got to college, I majored in special education.

MG: Tell me about going to college and how you chose to attend the University of Maryland.

LLB: From the guidance counselor, her name was Miss Flagg. She was a Caucasian lady at our high school, and we were really good friends. She coached me into going to Maryland. I didn't want to go out of the area too far. She helped me fill out the applications.

MG: Tell me more about your time at the University of Maryland. What did you study? What stands out to you?

LLB: At Maryland? What can I say stood out to me? Again, the English classes, and then that was the first time I had classes in black history, so I learned a lot there about black history. I had a dance class that I really liked.

MG: Did you meet your husband in college?

LLB: I met my husband in high school, actually. My last year of high school, in 1975 to '76, we met. He lived in northwest D.C. also, but I met him on a basketball court actually in Georgetown. He was playing basketball. I love sports. We met on a basketball court. [laughter] Then he went off to school. He was on the basketball scholarship in North Carolina. We were dating my last year in high and then went off to college. Then we got back together a couple of years later, afterward.

MG: You worked for the Department of Defense for some time.

LLB: Yes, I worked for two years for the Department of Defense at Fort McNair, for the provost marshal there. We had an office over at the Pentagon, so I went between Fort McNair and the Pentagon. After that, I went into private industry. I worked for an attorney, and then I worked for Battelle. That's when I really got to liking science more. I never really liked science that much in school, but once I worked for Battelle, Columbus Labs, I loved science. Dr. Suzanne Bolton at Battelle referred to me NOAA.

MG: Tell me more about what you were doing for the Department of Defense.

LLB: I worked for the provost marshal as his special assistant. Back then, it was a lot of electric typewriters. You just would not believe how things were back then. But his special assistant, keeping the schedule, typing a lot of letters – things like that.

MG: What was Battelle? How did you find that position?

LLB: After I had my daughter, that's when I got a job at Battelle.

MG: What year was your daughter born?

LLB: 1985.

MG: Sorry. Tell me more about what you were doing at Battelle, your role and responsibilities.

LLB: What did I do at Battelle? It was a lot of contracts that I worked on.

MG: How did you get the job at NOAA? What was your first position?

LLB: As a matter of fact, Dr. Suzanne Bolton, who I worked for at Battelle, she referred me to someone here at NOAA. At the time, this office was in Rockville, Maryland. That building is not even there anymore. I started there. Coming into the federal government, in those days, you had to come in at a lower grade. So I just wanted to get in. I came in as a program support specialist, I think it was, at the time. Actually, the person that I went to work for, his name is Bill Stanley, and he actually became the NOAA historian. I don't know if you've heard his name.

MG: Yes, his name is familiar to me. What was it like working for him?

LLB: It was great. He was a nice and fair supervisor. It was a good team. We were very close. Most of them have gone now, but there's a few of them still around NOAA.

MG: Were you doing any work around NOAA history then?

LLB: No, he wasn't actually doing NOAA history at the time. He would always talk about it, but he wasn't going into it. We were the program support office. So we just handled different – supported all the other parts of NOAA. I didn't stay there that long. Then I went from there down to NOAA headquarters, [which] is where I am now. That's where I was all these years, once I got down there.

MG: What was the position in headquarters?

LLB: When I first went down there in 1989, my position was support assistant.

MG: For whom?

LLB: Her name was Arva Jackson. She was the director then. I forget the name of the office, but we don't have that office anymore. [Editor's Note: Arva Marshall Jackson served as NOAA's Director of the Office of Civil Rights.] She later retired. Then I went from there to the Office of the Under Secretary, where I've been since '90. I didn't even stay with her for a whole

year. So I guess I don't even remember her title. She was a director, but I don't remember what the office was.

MG: Your role hasn't changed, but the people you work for have.

LLB: Yes.

MG: Tell me what that is like, and the people you have worked for.

LLB: In the Office of the Under Secretary? Well, it's a highly political office. Most of the positions in the office are politically appointed. So every time the [presidential] administration changes, those people leave, and new people come. So I've seen quite a few people come and go. The first administrator, the head of NOAA that I worked for, was Bill Evans back then. After that, Dr. Knauss. So Evans, Knauss, who now, of course, we have a program named for him; the Sea Grant Program is the Knauss Sea Grant Program. After him, was D. James Baker. After Dr. Baker, I don't remember who was next. I worked for five administrators. Then you had Dr. Jane Lubchenco, the first female head of NOAA. After her, Dr. Kathy Sullivan, who was during the Obama administration. Now we have an acting administrator, Dr. Neil Jacobs. As a matter of fact, I just saw Dr. Kathy Sullivan the other night because she has a new book out. We went to an event where she was speaking at the Smithsonian, Pat [Simms] and I, the other night. It was like a NOAA reunion. Dr. Sullivan was the NOAA chief scientist back in the '90s, and we worked with her then. She came back to head NOAA during the Obama administration.

MG: Were both female administrators appointed during Obama's administration?

LLB: Yes, they were. Dr. Jane Lubchenco is from Oregon State University. She was the first female administrator. She did the first four years. Then she left and went back to Oregon State. That's when Dr. Sullivan was appointed.

MG: Do new presidential administrations ever keep on the previous administration's under secretary?

LLB: No. I think because a lot of these people work on these political campaigns – so once the administration changes, they clean the slate because they have to then get jobs for these people who helped them out, to get in that position. That's how it works. Actually, each administrator – being in the office of the head of this organization, if they want to, they can bring in whoever they want, whatever staff they want, but for some reason, for all of these years, for thirty years, Pat and I – they've not brought anybody with them. I think that they like the continuity. Maybe the administrators that were leaving have passed on to the ones coming in – anyway, they've kept us all these years, but we knew that we could be moved into a different position easily, but it hasn't happened.

MG: Is that a relief?

LLB: I am relieved by that. Because I know that it could happen – I'm a Democrat. Pat's a Democrat. You're fearful of a Republican administration, but we soon learned not to fear;

people are people. They manage differently. My upbringing – I can get along with anyone. If there's an issue between me and someone, it's not my issue. I'm never going to give anyone a reason to have anything against me.

MG: Well, tell me about some of your early experiences working for Bill Evans.

LLB: He wasn't there that long. He was already there when I got there. I think it was maybe just a year before he was gone, and a new administration came in. I think in 1990, they made a change to another one, another administration when Dr. Knauss came on. I don't remember much about Bill Evans.

MG: Was he there during the George H.W. Bush administration?

LLB: Yes, I think the first George. Yes. So I don't remember much. He was nice. He was an older gentleman. Very courteous. I think that the employees liked him a lot.

MG: What were your day-to-day roles and responsibilities?

LLB: It was scheduling and travel. I actually ended up being the travel guru for the office. To this day, that's my main function. But, of course, Pat and I operate the office, and we've always, between each administration, tried to come up with best practices going forward.

MG: Is it hard to take a day off? Do you have to coordinate –?

LLB: We coordinate. When we want to take off, one of us has to be there. So we coordinate.

MG: Tell me a little bit more about Dr. Knauss.

LLB: Dr. Knauss is just like he was before he came to NOAA, the absent-minded professor. [laughter] He really was. Back in those days, we had a lot of correspondence that we were responsible for on paper. We still have correspondence and things that have to go to the Hill, or the White House, or OMB [Office of Management and Budget], but it's done electronically now. Versus back then, there was a lot – we had to be the best proofreaders and editors. So that was one part of our job always across the board, in addition to Pat being the primary scheduler for him. I'm her back-up. Once, there was a memo to be signed by Dr. Knauss. It went through all the appropriate clearances and through me, Pat, and Marietta Hendricks. Dr. Knauss signed the memo and his name was misspelled. We all missed the error. But I was the travel person. As you know, the administrator travels quite a bit. It's very detailed. It's not just arranging the travel, but back then, it was putting together the itineraries, coordinating with staff for meeting materials and agendas. It was a lot of work, but it was fun. I've always enjoyed the work.

MG: How was the Sea Grant fellowship named for Dr. Knauss?

LLB: The Knauss Sea Grant Fellowship – maybe because he came from the University of Rhode Island, and then being from an academic background, I think. I'm trying to remember if

there was something specific. Because we're a science agency, he was so much into the science and research part of it.

MG: Did he have a fisheries background?

LLB: I'm trying to remember what was his degree? He was an oceanographer. Many of them were oceanographers, even Dr. Sullivan. Although she's an ex-astronaut, she also has an oceanographer background. I think Dr. Baker has his degree in oceanography.

MG: Do you remember any major milestones or accomplishments during his time as administrator? What stands out to you?

LLB: I'll have to think about that because that's far back. Not that I can think of. Each administrator had some program that was their baby. Dr. Baker, that was when we first got GEO, Group on Earth Observations, so that became his baby. That continued on into other administrations, but that's where it started with him. That was the one thing that was dear to him that he took on.

MG: Dr. Knauss stay on though the Clinton administration?

LLB: Was he Clinton? No, I think Baker was Clinton. I think Knauss was on the end of Bush.

MG: Tell me more about Dr. Baker.

LLB: Yes, D. James Baker. He was the Clinton administration. He came on, was appointed during the Clinton administration. These under secretary positions are appointed by the Senate. They're really appointed by the President but confirmed by the Senate. Dr. Baker was a two-term under secretary. He did a lot of travel. Because of GEO, I think there was a lot going on, and they were getting it off the ground and did a lot of travel. But GEO is the one thing that stands out for him.

MG: Are we missing one other administrator from George W. Bush's administration?

LLB: Which one?

MG: After Baker.

LLB: After Baker, right. Who came after Baker? That's what I'm trying to remember. I'll have to call Pat. Pat has a better memory of all these things.

MG: That's alright.

LLB: We'll have to fill that in. [laughter]

MG: Was it pretty momentous to have the first female administrator?

LLB: Yes, that was an exciting time. Dr. Lubchenco. She was very nice. A very eloquent speaker. That's what I remember about her. She was a better speaker than any of the males that came before her.

MG: Was working for her different than a male administrator?

LLB: No. I would say no. But she was very nice.

MG: Did your duties stay the same?

LLB: Yes. Throughout the years, my duties have pretty much remained the same.

MG: What was her "baby" during those years? What did she focus on?

LLB: Lubchenco. There was one thing that she did. I can't remember what it is. I know one thing that she did love, and that is getting honorary degrees. I think she has the most. All of them were invited by some university to get an honorary degree, but, wow, did they invite her. I don't know why or what it was about her – maybe because she's from a university background. I guess that makes sense. But oh, man. But she loved that. Oh, a lot of her time was spent on work on the Deepwater Horizon oil spill. [laughter]

MG: Then Kathryn Sullivan came after. She seems like a really interesting woman, as well. What was she like?

LLB: She was very interesting, yes. To say the least, she was very interesting.

MG: Did you ever ask her about going to space?

LLB: Yes. I've heard it off the record, and she even talked about it the other night at the event we went to.

MG: What is the book she wrote?

LLB: It's about the Hubble [Space Telescope]. What is it called?

MG: The telescope. Neat.

LLB: Sony has actually asked for the rights to her book.

MG: To make a movie? Interesting.

LLB: So that's interesting, yes. It's called [*Handprints on Hubble: An Astronaut's Story of Invention*]. Her talk the other night was about inventors. It's real interesting that in her book – it's almost like the movie *Hidden Figures*. She may have gotten the idea from that movie, but she said there's a lot of people that were doing this vital work when she was going into space, and working on the Hubble, that she recognizes in this book.

MG: Good. I'll have to check that out.

LLB: I thought that was very interesting. I said, "That's awesome." I think that's awesome that she's doing that in her book.

MG: I interviewed someone yesterday who worked on the Hubble program. It's true that so many people play a role, but don't always get the recognition.

LLB: Yes.

MG: Tell me about how your job has changed under the current administration.

LLB: Under the current administration, the Trump administration, we don't have a confirmed under secretary. Someone was nominated by the President, but he did not get confirmed. He didn't even make it to the Senate confirmation hearing. I think a lot of our NOAA scientists did not want him, so it didn't happen. As a result of that, we still don't have an under secretary. We have an acting under secretary. The first acting under secretary was Rear Admiral Tim Gallaudet. His background is Navy. He is a forty-year Navy veteran, and one of the most personable under secretaries we've had. Him and Lautenbacher. How could I forget VADM Conrad Lautenbacher? That was the George W. Bush administration.

MG: There we go. That's what I thought.

LLB: My favorite of all the under secretaries. I don't know how I forgot him. That's who came after D. James Baker.

MG: Why was he your favorite?

LLB: Because he was just so personable. He also was a good speaker. I think I admired him most because he was very smart. When he first came on board, he told us, "Listen, when you schedule things – thirty minutes." I said, "But the folks in the budget office, they're going to ask us for two hours." When it's weather or satellites or certain things, we were saying, "Oh, sir, they're going to [request more time.]" He said, "If they can't tell me what I need to know in thirty minutes, then I don't need to know it." Everybody was astonished that they would come in there, they crammed everything in. He wouldn't take notes, but when he got up there to speak, he had it.

MG: That's impressive.

LLB: He was impressive. He had a lot of hearings. I don't know why. I think they all do their fair share of going on the Hill for hearings. They got to lobby to get us money to keep our programs running. He, in particular, I think that Congress respected him so much – both sides of the House. I think our budget did well under that administration. That was a Republican administration, but still the best administration for Pat and I as well. They promoted us. They valued us the most, I think. They let us know that they valued what we were doing.

MG: Tell me about your relationship with Pat Simms. It seems like you two are a package deal.

LLB: We're a package deal. To this day, people will call me Pat, and they'll call her Linda. Now it's on email as "Pat-Linda." Because we used to be a three-person office, we had three support employees. In between one administration, they didn't rehire that third position after someone retired. After Marietta Hendricks retired, they wouldn't let us rehire. I think that's when it started becoming Pat-Linda, Pat-Linda. When we get emails – a lot of our work is done on email – it's Pat-Linda, Pat-Linda. I don't think some people know us apart. [laughter] And we don't look anything alike.

MG: Tell me about working together. Do you work together well?

LLB: Yes, we do, and we always have – all these years, thirty years. We plan on going out together.

MG: Is it unusual to have an acting administrator for so long?

LLB: It is. Yes. Into the third year of an administration, we usually would have one by then. It takes about a year to get that under secretary confirmed. I'm sure there are some that may have come in within the first six months. But for most of them, it's usually by the end of the first year, and they're in position.

MG: Has that impacted your job or how things are managed in your office?

LLB: No. We just have to keep going, even when we have an interim period between administrations. We still have to keep going. It's some good downtime. The work is not as tedious or as much, but we still have to keep the office running. People are still calling.

MG: How much face time do you have with the administrators?

LLB: Every day.

MG: Wow.

LLB: Like I said, though, we started out with Admiral Timothy Gallaudet as the acting under secretary for this Trump administration. He actually is confirmed as our assistant secretary, Assistant Secretary for Oceans and Atmosphere. The other assistant secretary is Dr. Neil Jacobs, but he is Assistant Secretary for Environmental Observation and Prediction, which is the satellites side of the house. So we have the two assistant secretaries, who are in Senate-confirmed positions. They're the highest positions in NOAA at this time. So both of them have been in the acting role as the under secretary. First, Admiral Gallaudet, and now Dr. Jacobs.

MG: What you predict will happen? Is another name going to be introduced?

LLB: Yes. If President Trump wins again, I would say yes. If he doesn't, of course, then everybody leaves. We have about sixteen political positions in NOAA. From the top, from the

under secretary to assistant secretaries, the chief scientist – in the last two administrations, they haven't refilled the chief scientist position. Then you have directors of certain offices, like Director of Communications, our general counsel, all those are political appointees in those positions. The Chief of Staff in this administration is Stuart Levenbach. He's political. We have several policy advisors that are also political appointees.

MG: I wanted to ask you about the NOAA Fish Fry. You were here when it started. What is it?

LLB: It started out very small as a fish fry. Paul Friday, at the time, I think, he worked for the NOAA Budget Office. He started it. It was just a handful of people down at Hogate's restaurant in Southwest [Washington, DC] on the waterfront. It just started building from there. The next couple of years, it got too big for the restaurant, and he had to start finding other venues. Today, they sell five hundred tickets to that event every year now. It's been held for probably the last ten years at the Department of Commerce downtown. We have a cafeteria that has an outside courtyard. It's in the middle of the building. So between the outside courtyard and the cafeteria is where they have the fish fry now.

MG: Who manages the NOAA Fish Fry? It sounds like it started informally.

LLB: They have to get someone to run it every year, so it's been different people that have volunteered to run it.

MG: I thought Cheryl Oliver from NOAA Heritage ran it.

LLB: Cheryl has been running it, maybe the last couple of years. Before that, it was someone else. It's changed over the years.

MG: The purpose is to get together and celebrate NOAA?

LLB: Yes, and a lot of people come from the Hill, all of the people that we have relationships with, and the Congress, a lot of them come and their staff. The Secretary of Commerce will come down with his entourage, and walk around and talk to people. A lot of NOAA partners come. People from Lockheed [Martin Corporation] and places like that, and Harris Corporation – all those kinds of folks get invited. Now the tickets are sold online. Eight minutes after they go on sale – bam, done – sold out. It's become quite a social event.

MG: Do you attend every year?

LLB: No, after some years, the novelty has ceased for me. Now usually I'll just run through there just to say "hi" to a few folks and head on home.

MG: It sounds like a big event.

LLB: This will probably be my last one next year, so I plan to go.

MG: Are you planning to retire?

LLB: Pat and I are planning to retire. We are planning to go out together in the near future. We've not quite decided. We're going to go through – we want to see these first four years through. So when the next administration starts, at some point, during that year, I think is when we're going to go out.

MG: In your pre-interview survey, you wrote about when Ron Brown died in a plane crash. [Editor's Note: Ron Brown served as the Secretary of Commerce for the Clinton Administration, from 1993 until his death in a plane crash in 1996.] Can you tell me what happened and what the impact was?

LLB: Wow. That was a sad day. When we first heard about the crash over the news, the phones start ringing because everybody's going to call the under secretary's office, thinking we would get details first. Employees were so upset and calling to say, "Do you know anything different than what we know?" At least we were able to say to people, "The President has called. He's coming over." A lot of people came down from Silver Spring, and we got together in the DOC auditorium, which is huge. The President came over and expressed his condolences to everybody. That was good. That was good that he did that. Yes, actually, Ron Brown I really admired him, not because he was black and he was the first black head of the Department of Commerce, Commerce Secretary, but because he was another very, very smart man. Looking at the news reports, when the president would get together with his cabinet, everybody would be around Ron Brown. He had that presence about him and was very smart. He was doing a lot of good things for the Commerce Department. Had that plane not went down, I believe he would have been the first black male candidate for president.

MG: Oh, yeah?

LLB: I do. I think that's where he would have been. He was very personable. He was the only secretary – as long as I've been in that building, thirty years, he's the only secretary that's come around on his own to talk to employees.

MG: That's impressive.

LLB: The other ones will, on an occasion – like the Fish Fry, they'll walk around, doing that – or some special event, but not just to get in the building and walk around, talk to employees. He was the first one that did that.

MG: First Secretary of Commerce to do that?

LLB: Yes. First Secretary of Commerce that did that.

MG: Were you in the building when President Clinton addressed the staff about Ron Brown's death?

LLB: Yes. We went downstairs when he came over.

MG: What was that moment like?

LLB: It was good. It made you feel good that at least he cared enough then. The White House is right there, out the building window. You can see the White House South Lawn from our building, but still, he didn't have to come over. He could have just made that call, and that'd have been it. But he came over, and all of the different events that were held to celebrate his life – the President and the First Lady were there.

MG: Can you say what happened to Ron Brown? Where was he?

LLB: They were in Croatia on a mission trip. So we didn't just lose Ron Brown that day, but quite a few staff members because he traveled with a staff. Staff members were on that mission trip. People that I work with – because the under secretary's travel has to be approved in the secretary's office. So some of the people I knew and worked with were on that plane, as well. So we lost quite a few people that day. It was bad weather. There was one guy that was on his advanced team that was supposed to be on the plane because he was on the trip. But he went ahead of them because he was advance. Wherever they were going, he went ahead of them. He wasn't on the same plane – only survivor that was on the trip.

MG: You also wrote about a memorable beach cleanup that you participated in as a NOAA employee.

LLB: Yes. That would have brought me back to Conrad Lautenbacher, Vice Admiral Conrad Lautenbacher. I guess he and Gallaudet, who's here now, they're both admirals from the Navy. I don't know if that has anything to do with their personality, but they're so very much alike, the two of them. But Admiral Lautenbacher – we went out to the Fort McHenry cleanup that April. I think his wife Sue came along with us also. His wife was a school teacher in Fairfax County. I think she came along. Maybe she brought some of her students. We went out for the cleanup on Saturday morning. Students from the local universities and local community organizations were there – a lot of people. It really takes a lot to clean that area up. So once a year, in between that, it builds back up. Stuff just washes ashore from the water. Hence, this is what NOAA does. We research. We do studies on all that marine debris, stuff that's affecting the ocean. It was a good learning experience for me, too, to see all the trash that was coming out of the ocean. It's not good – all that Styrofoam. People get out there in boats, and they just discard stuff. It's sad.

MG: Didn't Admiral Lautenbacher hold up a piece of Styrofoam and say how it never degrades?

LLB: He said he never wants to use anything in his office that's Styrofoam again. [laughter] And he didn't. He didn't.

MG: Was the beach cleanup an annual effort?

LLB: Yes, annual effort. Every year, they would do it. I don't remember when it stopped. But yes, every year for many years.

MG: Something else you mentioned – and it would be so great to access the archives – is the NOAA Report.

LLB: Yes. That would be nice.

MG: Who put that together?

LLB: I don't know what office ran it. We can find that out. Cheryl might even know. Cheryl Oliver may know because she's been around a long time. She might know who used to run the NOAA Report. It may have been out of our Office of Public Affairs at the time. It's now called the Office of Communications. But I think Public Affairs may have been the one to put it together every month.

MG: What kinds of things would they report on?

LLB: Just the different things that NOAA was doing. That clean-up, for one thing, was once a year. When we went out there for the Fort McHenry clean-up, they'd report on that, and the different things that happened and the different people that showed up for it. Just everything that NOAA was doing – everything.

MG: It sounds like a great way to learn about the agency.

LLB: Yes. I remember reading it and really getting into it. On the way home, I'd be reading it. It was a good tool.

MG: Do you remember when the NOAA Report started?

LLB: No. I do not. Of course, now – I think we still have stuff. Everything is just automated now. Everything is on the computer. I still like reading the hard copy. That's why I loved the NOAA Report. But we do still have some things. It's just not the same to me, I guess. Because we have one thing that we get on email every so often, it's called "Postcards from the Field," if you've heard of that. Sometimes it might be some of our crew that's on a ship, talking about the research they're doing, or it could be a story with the Hurricane Hunters out there during a storm. There's some especially nice images. Or, it could be Admiral Gallaudet somewhere on one of these trips. He recently went to Palau and shared pictures. He's a diver, too. So he does a lot of work, a lot of good stuff for NOAA.

MG: The NOAA Report would be hand-delivered or put in your mailbox?

LLB: Yes, everybody would get a handful of them in the mailboxes, in the mail slots.

MG: Was it always a physical copy? Was the NOAA Report ever distributed via email?

LLB: It may have before it actually stopped circulating. I think it did towards the end.

MG: Do any stories from the NOAA Report stand out to you?

LLB: Nothing in particular. I just loved reading it. It was a good way to catch up on things. I'm in the head office, and I always wanted to know exactly what we were doing. There were

things I didn't know we were doing. Then I would link some things to meetings that had been going on. I would say, "Oh. Now I see. That's why they were meeting on that."

MG: You've met a number of presidents and celebrities while in this position. I'm wondering if you can talk about them, the occasion you had to meet them, and what your impressions were. When did you meet President Clinton?

LLB: I think the first time had to be at the White House for an event. It might have been something to do with one of the National Marine Sanctuary designations I think we did. They had the ceremony at the White House, and we got to go. It was in one of those rooms at the White House. He comes out, and they do the designation and the pictures. He signs the thing, and then he shakes hands with the people on the way out. That was good.

MG: You got to shake his hand.

LLB: Got to shake his hand, yes.

MG: Any other impressions stand out to do you from that occasion?

LLB: No, it was good. He was a good speaker, too.

MG: You met George W. Bush.

LLB: George W., yes.

MG: What was that like? What was the occasion?

LLB: I have to remember. George W. Laura was with him that day, whatever the event was. It was the two of them. I don't remember what the event was, but they also shook hands. It was another room at the White House. We got to go to a lot of things. These past couple of administrations, we have not been invited so much. They changed things somewhat. It might just depend on the administration. So now, of late, they only invite political. We used to get to go to the Easter Egg Roll at the White House. You could bring your children or grandchildren, or whomever. They would give us invitations to that and the White House Christmas tour once they decorated the White House for Christmas. We would get invited to those events. They would have that for the political appointees and their families and friends, and we would go to those. We had the opportunity to do the real White House tour, not the one that the public does – the real White House tour.

MG: What was that like?

LLB: It's really nice. Really, really nice to get to see some parts of the White House that the regular tour does not include.

MG: What administration was in place when you did the real White House tour?

LLB: We went a couple of times. I know one was during the Clinton administration and George W., I think, that we went.

MG: You have also met President Barack Obama.

LLB: Yes.

MG: What was that like?

LLB: He did some things that were not just the normal events that always happened. But this one was called a summer picnic for political appointees and friends. During that time, the Chief of Staff that we had, Margaret Spring, said, “Why don’t you go with me on my ticket?” So we went over, and it was a lot of fun. It was like a summer picnic on the south lawn of the White House. We took pictures, and they had this long fence. So we had us line up along the fence. They came out and came down the line shaking hands and taking pictures with lots of people.

MG: Did you get to say anything to President Obama?

LLB: No, I didn’t. Just shook hands because there were so many people. Actually, it was him and Michelle. They both came out. I shook both their hands.

MG: That is exciting. You also met Vice President Joe Biden.

LLB: Yes. That was exciting because we really got to talk to him because he swore in Dr. Lubchenco when she became the administrator, and she invited Pat and I over to her ceremony. She didn’t even know who was going to do her swearing-in. But when Pat and I got in the room – it was a small room. Anyway, when we got in the room, we didn’t see the presidential seal up there. I said, “Pat, it’s going to be Biden. It’s not going to be Obama.” It was Biden. [laughter]

MG: Were you disappointed?

LLB: No, no. Not at all. Not at all. He was very personable. He said a nice speech. He’s a big jokester. He was very humorous in the remarks he made. It wasn’t just Dr. Lubchenco. She was being sworn in as well as Dr. John Holden. I think he was the head of OSTP at the time, Office of Science and Technology Policy. So the two of them got sworn in together. We took pictures with him that day, with the Vice-President.

MG: You also met Ted Danson.

LLB: He came here for a meeting. He loves the ocean. It was a meeting that we were having, and he came in for the meeting. A couple of people in the Secretary’s office got wind. I don’t know how people find out these things. They stalk our calendars, I guess. “Linda, Pat, can you all let us know when he comes in? Are you all going to pick him up?” “Yeah, we’re going to go pick him up from the lobby.” [laughter] It was funny.

MG: Tell me also about your work with Sylvia Earle. She was one of the first female chief scientists for NOAA.

LLB: Yes.

MG: She sounds very interesting.

LLB: She's a really interesting woman.

MG: What was she like?

LLB: She loved NOAA. She loved the oceans. And she loved the sea creatures. She always wears breast pins, and they're all sea creatures, whether it's a turtle, an octopus. It's very nice. They're all beautiful. She's about this high; she's very short and petite, but boy, she's a giant woman, though – her knowledge of science, especially things in the ocean. I think she still has the record for the deepest dive – female deepest diver that there is. What else can I say about Dr. Earle? She's very spunky.

MG: What occasions would you have to work together?

LLB: She was the NOAA chief scientist.

MG: Can you tell me more about your working relationship?

LLB: At the time, Pat was her executive assistant, and I was sitting right next to them. I didn't work directly with her in her office. I still with the under secretary's office. At that time, Pat was working for the chief scientists, but we're all in the same suite. We're still in that same suite now. Yes.

MG: How long have you been in this building?

LLB: In Silver Spring?

MG: Yes.

LLB: When they built these buildings, they built us an office here, but we mainly work downtown [Washington, D.C.]. We only come out here on Fridays. The under secretary comes out here so that the people – especially the heads of the line offices, they have a meeting every Friday right in this room with all of the heads of the NOAA line offices and staff offices. I'm happy they want to get out here to where the bulk of the NOAA employees are. There's eight thousand employees in these four buildings. We should come out here at least some time. We'll come out here for special occasions if it's not on a Friday. Today, they're out in this area because they're over at our office in College Park at a memorial service. That's why they're not in here right now.

MG: You mentioned Daniel Albritton. I don't know much about him.

LLB: Dan Albritton, I think he was the director of our [Aeronomy Laboratory] in Ann Arbor, Michigan, or was it Boulder? One of those labs out there in Boulder or Ann Arbor. He was one of the most brilliant scientists that NOAA has ever had. He has won the highest of awards. He was always coming to our office for some meetings because he was the go-to person back in those days. That had to be in the '80s, I think. He was our top scientist. I think he ended up winning the highest award from the president.

MG: He did a lot of research on the ozone.

LLB: Yes, ozone depletion and all that work, yes.

MG: Do you know if he's still around or alive?

LLB: I don't know. I haven't seen or heard anything about him lately. I know he would be up in age now.

MG: What would the interaction be? Just at meetings?

LLB: Yes, just pretty much coming into the office, and having a casual conversation when he's in for different meetings. Like I said, he was actually from Boulder – I think he's from Ann Arbor. He's from that area, but he was in Washington so much. [laughter]

MG: Has the urgency around climate change impacted your work or NOAA's priorities as an agency?

LLB: Yes. We just had tons and tons of work done on climate change, as you know, and still do. And we still will in the future. I think I'll be gone, and they'll still be working on it, of course. But it's been exciting to work on all that. I hope that our scientists – we have career scientists that have been here for years doing the work. They're still doing their thing. We may not get funded for it right now, but I know that it won't go away. I try to not dwell on it. [laughter]

MG: You've been recognized for your good work at NOAA. You received a Silver Sherman award. What was that for?

LLB: Pat was awarded the very first Silver Sherman when it was created. So, Dr. Kathy Sullivan, when she was here this second time – not the first time – she and somebody else came up with the idea to start that award. It's a pin of a little sea otter. Pat got the very first one. Then, when Dr. Sullivan was leaving, that administration was closing out, the Obama administration, they gave me one, too, before they left.

MG: What is a "Silver Sherman?" What's the significance behind the sea otter?

LLB: There's a cartoonist that has a cartoon, and I think that's the name of it – Silver Sherman. Yes, you'll have to look that up. That's who they named it after, that cartoonist.

MG: You also received a NOAA Administrator's Award. What was the occasion for that?

LLB: The NOAA Administrator's Award, I think that was for superior work. I don't think – was it a specific project that year? That was about three years ago, I think. I think it was '16 or '17 that I got the Administrator's Award, but I think it was for overall great work.

MG: Can you reflect back on your career a little? You mentioned you plan to retire in a year or so. What have you learned about the environment through your work at NOAA?

LLB: The earth and the environment is always evolving. There's always something to learn, and there always will be. The work that NOAA does, I think it just vital to keep us from going under. I think that the work has to continue, not just NOAA, but all the NOAA partners and other science agencies that work together. It's just so vast. I can't pinpoint a single thing, but with all of the melting of the glaciers – people don't think much about it. When you're not close to something, you don't think much about the impact that it's having, but it is; it is having an impact. I see the work that our scientists do, and I know that it's helping.

MG: Good. What else stands out to you when you look back on your career?

LLB: Just that I've enjoyed working in the office of the head of NOAA. I don't have any regrets. I don't have any regrets, not a single regret.

MG: How else have you seen things change at NOAA? You have thirty-five years' worth of perspective.

LLB: Yes. How have they changed? Well, the technology is the biggest change. The people come and go. You got different personalities, different management styles that come and go. But, I think the constant is our career scientists that remain the same, even things that we go through, whether it's a program not being funded this time, it might again later down the line. I've learned that, too, that sometimes they go away, and then they come back again.

MG: Okay. Can you tell me a little bit about your life outside of NOAA?

LLB: Well, we have two adult children, a son and a daughter. Between them, they have six kids. [laughter] My daughter has one little girl, but her husband had three, so that's four. My son has two boys, so we claim six. We're a very close-knit family. We all live close in the area, not far from each other.

MG: Tell me a little bit about your husband Dwight.

LLB: We got back together after college and got married in 1984. Life's been good. He's from D.C. and has a twin brother. His family is a very close family, too. As a matter of fact, his twin brother – there's one house that separates our houses. So there's the twin, another house here, and then our house. It's good, though, because now their mom has moved in. She's living six months with them, and six months with us. So the winter months, she stays with us. [laughter]

MG: Do you live in D.C. still?

LLB: We live in Maryland.

MG: Is there anything I forgot to ask you about? Anything else that you want to add to the record?

LLB: If I think of something, I'll email you.

MG: That would be great.

LLB: Pat and I were talking one day, and I said, "Pat, I forgot about that." [laughter] So I will. I will think about it.

MG: Maybe when I talk to Pat next, you can add more to the record then.

LLB: Okay. Sounds great.

MG: This has been a treat. Thank you for your time.

LLB: Yes, of course. Thank you for having me.

MG: Thank you.

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Reviewed by Molly Graham 1/22/2020
Reviewed by Linda Lawhorn-Brown 2/24/2020
Reviewed by Molly Graham 1/26/2020