Nevada Test Site Oral History Project
University of Nevada, Las Vegas

Interview with Lavonne Lewis

November 16, 2004
Las Vegas, Nevada

Interview Conducted By
Shannon Applegate

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[00:00:00] Begin Track 2, Disc 1.

Shannon Applegate: *Well, I'd like to formally thank you for being a part of our project and for giving us your time. We really appreciate it.*

Lavonne Lewis: Well, you're welcome.

So if you can just go ahead and give us a little bit of your background. Did you grow up in Las Vegas?

I'm Elsie Lavonne Lewis. No, I did not grow up in Las Vegas. I grew up in Arkansas. I was born and raised in Pine Bluff, Arkansas—

[Recording stopped to answer telephone.]

[00:00:26] End Track 2, Disc 1.

[00:00:00] Begin Track 3, Disc 1.

OK, there we go.

I was born and raised in Pine Bluff, Arkansas, and received all of my education through college on a campus that was about two blocks from my house. I went to preschool, grammar school, and high school, and college on the same campus.

All on the same campus?

Yes.

How big was the school?

It was not very large. We had probably about twelve hundred college students, I guess. It was a land grant institution, Arkansas A&M College, one the "separate but equal" institutions that were prominent in the South. And as part of the college campus, because they trained teachers, they

had an elementary school as part of the complex, and a high school, where teachers did their student teaching. They also did student teaching in the town, but they did do it on the campus schools. So I went to school there.

And now where in Arkansas? I didn't—

Pine Bluff, Arkansas.

Pine Bluff.

Pine Bluff. It's forty-five miles southeast of Little Rock.

Oh, OK. I know Little Rock.

And then I graduated from college and moved to New York City where my parents actually lived at the time. My parents had moved there during the war [World War II] and I stayed in Pine Bluff with my grandparents, my great-grandparents actually, and I used to go to New York during the summers and at Christmastime and things like that. So after college I moved to New York and got a job as a tax examiner, and then I got married and moved to Los Alamos, New Mexico. I left a city of eight million and moved to a town of eight thousand. I was seventy-two hundred feet above sea level, and that was a good experience. I always enjoyed living in Los Alamos.

Now why did you move to Los Alamos?

Got married. My husband worked in Los Alamos. He was a systems engineer—well, that's not what they called them then, I don't remember what they called them, at the Los Alamos Scientific Laboratory [LASL]. He worked with the Los Alamos Scientific Laboratory there. Then we moved to—

Do you know about what year that was?

That was 1961. In ’61 we moved to Los Alamos, stayed in Los Alamos from ’61 to ’65, moved to Southern California—

What part of Southern California?

Well, we moved to Palos Verdes, Rolling Hills Estates, like the second black family to move into the area, and dealt with all the paint and the throwing of trash. That was during the years when California had passed Proposition 9, [which] said you didn’t have to rent to people of color or sell to people of color, and the realtor who sold us our house, they practically drove him out of business.

Really!

Yes. In fact, the people who sold us the house had a sign up on the door that said, “We welcome neighbors of any race, religion, or national origin.” So they were just really, really very, very nice. It was a really neat neighborhood. We made some really good friends in the neighborhood, and lived there until 1969. My husband worked for Computer Sciences Corporation, and Computer Sciences Corporation got a contract with the Department of Energy [DOE] here in Nevada, so he was transferred here in 1968 as the manager of systems engineering. And so we moved here. Came here—I moved to town in February of 1969.

I hated Las Vegas. It was absolutely an *awful* place to live. It was. It was hot, it was bigoted, and the only jobs that African Americans had in this town, for the most part, were maid and porter in the hotel. There were a *few* teachers, there was one black lawyer, there was one black doctor, at the time we moved here. I *don’t* think there was a principal. And I kind of came to town in the *throes* of a school desegregation suit. See, I had been very involved in the League of Women Voters all the time in all the other places, and so I got very involved in the League of Women Voters again. And they filed an *amicus* [friend] brief to the school desegregation suit

which had been filed by the NAACP [National Association for the Advancement of Colored People]. And meanwhile my spouse was working for Computer Sciences Corporation, buying a new, or getting the specifications anyway, on a new computer system for the Department of Energy.

[00:05:00] So after we had been here for a while, I decided that I wanted to go to work. I had worked part-time in all the places we had lived, and my children were about to start to kindergarten, so I made an application at Reynolds Electrical and Engineering Company [REECo]. And they were on a strike, 1970, REECo was on strike because the company was trying to get an agreement with the building trades that they were going to basically open up to African Americans, because there were no African Americans in the building trades. And they had a strike of 107 days to get that issue settled, and it was eventually settled by the unions agreeing that they would take in so many African Americans into their apprenticeship programs.

So when the strike was over, I walked into REECo one day, I guess, just really—in late September, it was very warm, I remember that I was just breezing because the office was located right near where I lived. I lived on Milo [sp] Way, which is in Richfield Village behind what is, it wasn't then, but is the Palace Station now, in that housing development. Their office was there by the Palace Station—where that street is now that comes out from around the Palace Station. Well, that was the REECo offices.

And so I walked in there and said, you know, `Oh, you have an application for me for a job? I know the strike is over.`

And so the guy said, `Oh, yeah, come in, we want to talk to you.`

I said, `Oh, no, you can't interview me. I'm not dressed appropriately.`

Well, anyway, I got interviewed and I got hired for $4.10 an hour as an accountant.

And is that what you got your degree in, in economics?

My degree was in business administration with an emphasis on accounting.

So I got hired as an accountant in the Benefits Department. And I was one of four female exempt employees , exempt from the Fair Labor Standards, that they had at REECo at the time.

So that was in October of 1970, and in February of 1972 they offered me a position as the Equal Employment Opportunity Officer. Joe Neal had that job, and the general manager, who was Ron Kiehn who was a great man; said he was moving him out of that job, and he did. So they offered me the job. And I remember I went from making seven thousand dollars a year to making thirteen. That was a fabulous pay raise. I mean I was making eight thousand by that time.

And I stayed in that job for four years, with REECo, where they made significant strides. REECo was always good and had a *large* percentage of minority population, but most of the people were in lower-level jobs, and Ron Kiehn and Kevin Efroymson—Kevin Efroymson was the legal counsel; he dealt with the unions. Ron was the general manager. And they really, really worked very, very consistently to change that company and make—and put African Americans in jobs throughout the organization. The emphasis was, of course, on African Americans. We didn't have any Hispanic population in this community at that time. African Americans were about 13 percent, Hispanics may have been about 3 or 4 percent of the population, and Native Americans were less than 1 [percent]. So there was a significant emphasis on just providing opportunity for African Americans to move into—and women, because we also opened up an electronic training class for the first women in electronics at the Nevada Test Site,. We got **[00:10:00]** women into the building trades, nontraditional jobs, operating engineers and many of the other building trades, electricians, where they had not been before, African Americans into those building trades. And you know I don't know what's happening with the building trades now, but there was a big push with REECo and many of the African Americans who are

presently working as electricians and plumbers and people like that went through those apprenticeship programs at the Nevada Test Site.

How was that received from the people that were already there?

It was—there was a lot of push back from the people who were already there, and the African Americans and women who moved *into* those positions *really* had to be very, very strong to deal with the harassment that they received. But the company did not tolerate it, so that the people who engaged in those kinds of activities learned very quickly that their positions were in jeopardy if they continued to engage in that kind of activity and if it could be proven. Now of course many of the people tried to, you know, [they] handled it themselves. They worked through their issues. But we had a regular Equal Employment Opportunity Office that investigated complaints of discrimination. The Department of Energy had oversight for all of that. And then of course we had a few things that went to the EEOC [Equal Employment Opportunity Commission] and the Equal Rights Commission, but they weren't very effective. The Department of Energy and the internal offices that we had were the most effective offices for dealing with that. And it became part of the performance appraisal for employees in management. They were evaluated on their performance in that area. We weren't talking about quotas. These were goals that they had, and we looked at all aspects of those goals, including good faith efforts, what kinds of things did you do in order to find a metallurgical engineer? Recognizing that they are as scarce as hen's teeth under normal circumstances. So, you know, all of those aspects of the behavior of the organization were looked at. And the culture of the organization, as a result, changed. But that took a while.

I stayed in the Equal Employment Opportunity Office until 1976, and in early 1976 I went to the Human Resources Office as an assistant manager for human resources with the

responsibility of employment and training and personnel security, because security was a big issue at REECo. Within a few months, the other assistant manager left and went to—EG&G [Edgerton, Germeshausen, and Grier] got a contract at Idaho Falls. The general manager left, who was Ron Kiehn, and this assistant manager in human resources left, so I got to be the assistant manager for *all* of HR. And the manager was Leon Goldsberry who was *very*, very skeptical of having me in this department. Just *very* skeptical. But in a short amount of time, he never showed that openly, but in a short amount of time he was just very, very supportive, and we ended up being the absolute best of friends.

Did you ever find out why he was skeptical?

Oh, I think that he felt I was going to—I don't know, I was going to just be an advocate all the time, advocating for employees. And really, in the Equal Employment Opportunity Office, I tried to tell people that I am not an advocate, I am an impartial party representing both management and employees, and looking at situations, and developing programs that are going to be of benefit to the organization. And I think that's what any **[00:15:00]** affirmative action specialist or equal employment opportunity manager has the responsibility to do, so that—

What was that like? Did you have to deal with emotion, like were people emotional by the time they—?

Oh, sure, people were *very* emotional. That was a very emotional issue. If you're saying somebody discriminated against you, the manager's mad, OK? Because you're saying I'll never—and they're calling me names. And yet frequently you have to just show people how by your actions—well, I never concerned myself—most of the time I didn't concern myself with intent. But your actions resulted in discrimination against this person. And you looked at all kinds of aspects: how many vacancies have you had, for instance, if you had somebody claiming

they didn't get the job because they were a woman or because they were an African American or a Hispanic or whatever group. And you say how many *opportunities* did you have to fill this job? What is it that *this* person has that this person does *not* have that makes him more qualified for this position? After you'd looked at all those aspects, then frequently people could not give you an explanation to why they made the decisions. On occasion the decisions were overturned or at least you had, you know, if people were terminated and the rules had not been implemented appropriately and consistently, then you would put them back to work.

Now did you affect policy once you were uncovering maybe some of these unfair practices?

Oh, yes.

Really? So what kind of policy do you think came out of—?

Well, we had a very, very strong equal employment opportunity policy which was revised, and we're talking in the seventies, so you know this is a long time ago. This is a time when those things were not as prevalent as they got to be in the eighties, late eighties and nineties. I think we're going back now to where we were in the sixties, but anyway. So yes, we did affect policy. We participated on a regular basis in all the staff meetings, gave our opinion on any number of issues, and the general managers at REECo were just very, very open to equal employment issues so that they—I got included on all kinds of discussions, all kinds of plans. And this was even true in Human Resources. Human Resources was a big issue at REECo and you spent a lot of time doing human resources kinds of things. One, because the contract—we were the contractor, but the contracting officer used to require that kind of information, so you had to develop a *lot* of reports, a lot of data, and in the *review* of the data they looked to see what was your performance like in these areas.

So why do you think the upper management was like that? I mean why do you think the REECo culture was like this? Was it mandated from the top down? Were they getting pressured—?

It was mandated from the top down, and I don't know why because certainly the other subsidiary of EG&G here did not come even close to the kind of equal opportunity performance that we had at REECo. And we had the same contracting officer. I think it was because of the people who were in those positions, *and* it was because of the people who were in Human Resources and in the equal employment opportunity positions that had a big impact. Ron Kiehn, I think, really just wanted to do what he felt was the right thing, Harold Cunningham was the same way, and Dale Fraser was the same way, the three people that I worked for. They really were interested in making an impact on what happened in this community in terms of minorities and women, giving them the opportunity that they felt they deserved, and being fair; and I think they were very interested in being fair.

[00:20:00] *Now was it difficult recruiting minorities and women for these positions, to kind of get them out there and to take leadership roles and to—?*

No. Minorities and women are available. They are there. They are all over the country. People who walk around talking about, `I can't find them`," I think that's just a bunch of nonsense, really. You *can* find them, you know. We recruited every year at historically black colleges, and we went to California schools to get Hispanics, and we went to New Mexico. We went to where the people were, to encourage them to move to Nevada. Just like if we needed to hire drillers, especially then when they were still doing testing, we hired oil field-type drillers at the Nevada Test Site. Well, you can't find oil field-type drillers in Las Vegas, so we went to Texas and went to Midland and recruited in the bars.

Oh, did you really?

Yes, because that's where you found them.

Oh, that must've been a fun recruiting trip.

Oh, yes. We used to look at people very differently. You can't do that now but we'd look at—you're hiring building trades and so you get to your certain building trades, like you get to iron workers. Back then, and you'd say, `Well, how many arrests has he had? Nine. Well, what were they for?`

[They would respond], `Well, they were for fighting.`

You would say, `Oh, that's all right, I'll take him. He's fine. He'll do good.`

Yeah. He's tough. Oh, that's funny. So there was a whole different mindset back then.

Well, yeah. We would rarely hire people if they had been arrested for stealing. *Generally* didn't take people if they had been arrested for murder, even though we had one or two.

Oh. Depends upon the circumstances, right?

Depends upon the circumstances, right. We had one guy, as a matter of fact, he worked *for* us. He went up, and I guess his son-in-law had been beating his daughter unmercifully, so he got in his car, he drove to Montana and killed his son-in-law, he came back to work. So they arrested him and he went to trial, got sentenced to jail for some period of time, came back, we gave him back his job.

Really?

Well, the thought was—I didn't do that, but the thought was that you know, that was a crime of passion, and that was also in the seventies. But we did not, but we didn't tolerate— *anybody* who stole anything got terminated, *anything*, didn't matter *what* it was, doughnut, hey, [claps hands] you know. Yeah.

Oh, really. So there were some rules laid down that you couldn't cross. Now if someone found themselves in trouble with—like stealing was one rule. What were some of the other rules where they would be completely terminated?

Absent three days without notice.

Oh, really.

We terminate you. Fighting, both people got terminated.

Regardless of their record or—

Regardless of their record. If you were fighting, you got terminated. Now that didn't mean we wouldn't rehire you. We rehired people all the time. We had all kinds of mixes. I mean we would terminate a thousand people during the course of the year and hire twelve hundred because there was a constant changing mix. As you were doing things at the test site, you needed iron workers today, you need electricians tomorrow, you need operating engineers week after next. So there was this constant changing mix that was going on at the test site.

And then it would flux with the budget, right? Was that—?

It fluctuated with the budget, too, yes, but mostly it was due to the mix. Now as you got more money, like when we were building at Tonopah, building the Tonopah Test Range up there, then we would do—that was more money.

Now when you worked in the Equal [Employment] Opportunity Office, did anything go to court, or were issues or conflicts just mediated within the company, or would anything go into a courtroom?

It seems to me that *over* the period of a number of years, we had maybe one or two cases go to court. But no, not very many. Most of our cases were solved in house. Others that went to the Equal Rights Commission or the EEOC were *generally* solved in favor of the company. We had

[00:25:00] excellent records and could, for the most part—because we had such a high percentage of minority employees, it was *statistically* very difficult to prove discrimination. And because we also had an EEO-1 report that looked fairly good, after a few years in particular, in terms of the number of employees that were in supervisory positions, that occurred. For instance, if we had a large percentage of minorities as custodians—and REECo had twenty-six agreements with thirteen different unions, because we had construction agreements and then we had maintenance and operations agreements with the same unions, depending on the kind of employees that we were having at the time. And we had an excellent relationship with them. You'll have to interview Claudette Enus, she was the labor relations manager at REECo, as well as Jerry McGee [sp]. Claudette is the human resources director for the City of Las Vegas now.

So did you see a trend in some of the complaints that were coming at you or—?

Well, frequently we would get a lot of complaints from the Hispanic miners, and we dealt with those a lot, people who worked up in the far reaches of the test site, Area 12, mining underground. We used to get a number of complaints from them who felt that they were not getting their share of supervisory positions. That was very difficult to sustain in terms of proving it because the numbers didn't bear them out in terms of the number of foremen, those kinds of things.

REECo did a lot of training. Everybody had to be trained in equal employment opportunity, and then they did refresher training for all of their employees, so we trained in trailers on the test site and every place. But everybody got to go to training, ask questions, have open discussions, and it got to be part of the culture.

Now did secrecy ever come up? Like were there ever people that were working on particular sections of the test site that maybe had a complaint but couldn't really tell you what their job was or what they were doing or—?

Not at the Nevada Test Site, no. There may have been some of that up in Area 51, and I never went over there, but Claudette did. But for the most part, most of the people that worked for REECo could tell you what their job was. They weren't dealing with things that were—they were in *areas* that were secure, but REECo itself did not deal with nuclear material and that kind of thing, and results of tests. That was done primarily by the laboratories. And so no, you never got into a position where somebody couldn't tell you what they did.

OK. And then now you moved up through the ranks, right, so you began—

Well, I started as an accountant and moved into the Equal Employment Opportunity Officer. I then went to assistant manager of Human Resources, and then I went to the manager of Human Resources. And then I went to the corporate office as the corporate vice president of Human Resources, and that was in Wellesley, Massachusetts.

So you moved for that.

Yes. I moved for that, for three years.

So how did you enjoy leaving Nevada and the whole—?

Well, REECo had decided they were not going to bid on the contract at the Nevada Test Site. OK. EG&G rather made that decision. And so this was in 1995. The contract was going to expire at the end of 1995. In February of '95 the vice president of Human Resources for the corporation had a sudden heart attack and died.

So the CEO called me up and said, `What'll it take to get you to move to Boston?`

And I said, `I don't know. What are you offering?`

[00:30:00] So he said, `Well, come back and we'll talk about it.`

So I went back to Boston and we talked about the job back there. Meanwhile, a few years earlier I had gone through a two-year management training program that EG&G had sponsored, where we went to Boston for a week a month and trained at Northwestern University. It was, I guess, like an MBA [Master of Business Administration] program but geared to the company, mostly to write case studies for EG&G. So I had done that for two years. But over the years I'd gotten to know the CEO and the other people back there. So they offered me the job and I took it. And [I] sold my house here, moved to Boston, stayed for three years, and said [sound of loud, deep breath], and moved back to Nevada.

Too cold?

Well, you know, too cold, and the environment there was certainly not one that was supportive of equal employment opportunity and affirmative action. *Very*, very different. Boston's a very bigoted city. So it was not that at all. It was not the kind of caring, nurturing environment that Las Vegas was.

Really. And that was within the office itself in Boston, within the company?

That was within the company. It was really within the company. The subsidiaries up to the late nineties—mid-nineties anyway, were fairly independent, so that the contracts that EG&G had with the government were really very independent because most of them worked—the company had no investment in those contracts. They were, what you call, government-owned, contractor-operated, GOCOs, and the company didn't put up any money other than to write the proposal and then they are fully reimbursable with the company getting a fee for running those operations.

OK, so Nevada office was pretty self-contained.

Yes, totally.

And so when you went up to the Boston office—now what did you do when you went to the Boston office? What were your job duties?

Well, I was then responsible for all of the human resources across the world. And we had eighty-seven sites in forty-two countries.

Wow! What was that like? I mean what was—?

Well, that was just, you know, there was a good deal of travel. You had the responsibility for benefits and developing programs and processes for the entire corporation. They were looking at trying to move more to—with the divisions being less autonomous so that we could get some added value from doing things in a similar fashion; using some more centralized recruiting, using a common computer system that would allow at least to get information from about the company.

So were you a part of that goal?

Oh, yeah, I was instrumental in that, instrumental in trying to get that movement going.

So did you have to learn about technology and evaluate some—?

Well, see, here at REECo I already knew about technology. During my tenure, we had bought two different computer systems for the Human Resources, so we purchased PeopleSoft, that was the last one, and the first one was, oh, I don't remember the name of it. But anyway, you have to write a proposal, rather a request for a proposal, then you have to evaluate their proposals. So I was fairly familiar with technology and what you needed in the Human Resources system. I had been dealing with that forever, the whole time I'd been in Las Vegas.

So it sounds like you had to be real flexible and learn—

You had to know a lot of things, or learn a lot of things. You had to know compensation, benefits, employment, personnel security, and training. So I went to a lot of training activities. I

got certified as a compensation professional, Certified Compensation Professional number 86 in the world, in the country. And that was in the seventies when they first started to do that kind of **[00:35:00]** thing. Did a lot of benefits, benefit negotiations. Worked in Las Vegas on one of the first PPOs—

"PPOs." What's that?

What is a PPO? [pause] Preferred Provider Organization. And that was in conjunction with the Nevada Resort Association, had kind of started a group and we got in on that and started to work with them.

You know what? We really should've scheduled this for another day—

Oh, I'm sorry, are you—?

—when I have about three or four hours.

I'm sorry. OK, so you have to go now?

Well, I'm going to have to go shortly, yes, I got to run some reports for the church and I've got to go to a meeting. Remember I said I had a meeting over at the Agassi School?

Oh, OK. Could I ask you one more question?

Sure.

Did you ever encounter protesters or—?

Oh, yeah, all the time. And a lot of protesters were from St. James. Father Louis Vitale who was one of the early pastors here was a big protester at the Nevada Test Site.

Yeah, we've interviewed him.

Yes, and he and Father Brian Flynn [sp] who was a pastor a few years later, I guess somebody came to him one day and said, `Why aren't you out there protesting at the Nevada Test Site?` He said, `Heck, half of my parishioners work up there. Are you`

kidding? But the protesters used to sleep in the church, and I remember Sister Rosemary [Lynch] one time was protesting and she went in to meet with the DOE manager here in Las Vegas whose name was [General Mahlon] Gates. They used to call him Ink Gates. And so she was talking about their reasons for protesting and everything, and then she mentioned prayer, and so Ink said, Yes, why don't we pray, Sister? And they got down on their knees in his office and prayed. Harold Cunningham's *wife* [Cynthia Cunningham] was a big protester. Cynthia was a big protester, and he was the manager of REECo. And you know everybody just kind of coexisted together. I mean they used to jail them out at the site, and they provided Porta Potties and water and all kinds of things for the protesters.

Now did you have an opinion either way on nuclear weapons testing when you entered into this job, or did you develop an opinion as you—?

I didn't have an opinion on nuclear weapons testing when I entered into the job, and I felt that—you know I really, I guess, didn't have one when I left, on nuclear weapons testing *per se*. I thought that the operation at the Nevada Test Site provided a tremendous amount of opportunity for minorities in this community. It was the *only* place where minorities really could get a fair shake, because the hotels were—you know, the Justice Department had to come in and make them hire minorities, and then they seemed to do it very, very grudgingly. I thought that if the country needed to test nuclear bombs, this was an ideal place to do it because of its isolation. And if you really think about that, even now, this state, compared to some of the more populous states, is an ideal place to do that. The test site had a safety record unparalleled. You know they kill more people falling off of buildings in Las Vegas while they're building high-rise hotels than ever got killed at the Nevada Test Site. They had one venting of a test, and I think that was in 1970, Baneberry. Everybody talks about that. But for the most part, the Nevada Test Site, once

they went to underground testing—now when they were doing atmospheric testing, I don't know what the government knew, but people *obviously* thought it was just a great big thing to go and hang out. But once they went to underground testing, it was just very, very safe. The jobs up there, which were all construction jobs like they do here in Las Vegas, were by **[00:40:00]** *far* safer than the similar jobs downtown. We didn't have people falling off buildings and getting crushed by stuff. Just didn't have it. We did have one guy one day, they had been drilling this hole and they covered it over with plywood. *All* of the people when they're working around a hole, that's fifteen hundred feet down, are supposed to tie off. These people apparently did not tie off, and I don't know what they were thinking about. The guy in front picked up the plywood and he walked straight ahead. The guy behind him walked right behind him and fell in the hole. But that's the kind of thing—

Oh! Did he survive?

Of course not! No, no, fifteen hundred feet down in the water. No, no, no, he didn't survive. But for the most part, we did not have accidents. On occasion, we had people who had automobile accidents on the test site, or their car skidded or truck skidded, that kind of thing, but we rarely, rarely had accidents. A lot of people used to *die* at the test site. We had people who *lived* at the test site who had heart attacks and those kinds of things, but we didn't have a *lot* of people who got killed in industrial-type accidents.

[00:41:37] End of Track 3, Disc 1.

[End of interview]