**Rita Hamlet Oral History**

4/16/2019

Bill Barry, Interviewer



Bill Barry:

Okay. It is April 16th, and I'm with Rita Hamlet at her house in Baltimore. So, tell us a little bit about how you grew up and how you started working at Sparrows Point.

Rita Hamlet:

Well, I grew up in the Lafayette project years ago. Even when I got married, me and my husband got an apartment at Lafayette project.

Bill Barry:

And where was the Lafayette project?

Rita Hamlet:

It was on Colvin Street, right in East Baltimore. Now right behind where we lived then is a post office.

Bill Barry:

Okay.

Rita Hamlet:

Right there. And that's where I grew up. Because I got married at 17.

Bill Barry:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Rita Hamlet:

And I grew up there. We just thought we were poor. We were told we were poor, but I didn't think we were poor because I didn't want for anything. So I didn't think it. But now, as I can track back over my life, we lived in a poor community. Then me and my husband bought a house 44 years ago, around the corner, 644 East 36th Street. And I still have that house.

Rita Hamlet:

And then I took on a family of foster children. Their mother grew up with my kids, and she was dying. She had cancer. And I took her children. And the state said, "You can't raise them in here," because my mother and father was there. My mother's sister. You can't raise children with older people. So I bought this house 25 years ago. And the children... Then they was seven, nine, and 11. Now all of them in their 30s. And they still come. They still call me Mama Rita. And I had five kids. I always thought I had a good life. I don't know. I always thought I had a good life. And I remember even how I got hired at Bethlehem Steel.

Bill Barry:

Okay. How did you get hired?

Rita Hamlet:

I took my brother and my cousin to fill out the application. And I seen these two ladies coming up out of the basement, and I say, "Miss, what was you all doing in there?" She said, "We're filling out application." I said, "They hire women?" She said, "They get ready to hire them." I got out the car and went and filled out an application. Two weeks later I got hired. They did tell me I had to gain 10 pounds. And I did put rocks in my pocket and in my socks, and went back. And the man said, "In three weeks you've gained 7.4 pounds, so I know you're gaining." It was the rocks I put in my socks, in my pants pocket, down in my bra so I could... The rocks gained the weight. I didn't. So...

Bill Barry:

Where had you been working before that?

Rita Hamlet:

Before that I worked for C&P, the telephone company.

Bill Barry:

Okay.

Rita Hamlet:

I worked there at C&P. But I'm going to tell you, Bethlehem Steel took out more taxes than C&P paid.

Bill Barry:

Okay.

Rita Hamlet:

And don't get it wrong. Later I loved my job. Even now I miss it, and I miss the people that I worked with.

Bill Barry:

So, what was it like then, the first day on the job? Where were you assigned?

Rita Hamlet:

I was assigned to a place called the ore dock.

Bill Barry:

Yeah, right.

Rita Hamlet:

Ships would come in, and we would have to put the rope around so the ships wouldn't move, and guys would be on the ships pointing to me. Like, "It's a woman. It's a woman." Really, when I first got that job... There was a singer called Stevie Wonder, and he caught a bus to New York, and I felt like him. It was skyscrapers and everything. I looked all around. It was like, "Oh, my God. I ain't never seen nothing like this." And some of the stuff I had to do was like... They say, "You got to climb down this hole of the ship." The hole was 40 feet deep, and the ship was two blocks long, so where's the hole? And we'd have to clean it up, and then, when you climb up to get out the hole, the men would swing their legs around, and they would have to grab me by the back of my pants and my shirt and pull me up out of there. I couldn't get it.

Rita Hamlet:

And one day I came to work, and only two other people came, and they were having a problem. So they say, "Hamlet, you're going to have to go down there by yourself." I went down there, cleaned it out, did everything. This time, to get out, the crane operator got out and pulled me up off. Because when you got to the last ladder, my leg couldn't swing around. And he pulled me out, and he say, "You did a terrific job."

Bill Barry:

Now, what were you cleaning out?

Rita Hamlet:

The hole of the ships. Iron ore would come in. The little pellets of iron would come in, and they would clean that out, and they would take that and put it into a storage bin, and they would send that up to the coke oven.

Bill Barry:

On a conveyor belt.

Rita Hamlet:

On a conveyor belt, and that would make the steel. And I worked doing that job for about three years.

Bill Barry:

And how did the guys treat you, when you started working?

Rita Hamlet:

It was a little difficult at first because this guy said to me... and we were of the same race... He said to me, "You wanted a man's job." I went home crying and told my grandfather, who worked there. Who used to. And he said, "No, you tell him this." So the next time he told me, "You wanted a man's job," I say, "No, sir. I wanted a man's paycheck. And since you wouldn't give me yourn, I came and got my own. Okay?"

Rita Hamlet:

And then the foreman told me, "You work with this guy, and everything he do, you do, and you'll learn." He jumped up and ran up the steps. I jumped up and ran behind him. He said, "What's the matter?" I said, "I don't know. The foreman told me whatever you do, for me to do." He said, "You're the first person that ever ran behind me." I said, "Well, I come to do what you want me to do." Like that. And that build a bond.

Bill Barry:

You don't remember his name?

Rita Hamlet:

No, not right off hand.

Bill Barry:

Okay.

Rita Hamlet:

Because I would take pants that I would buy from a second-hand store and cut them up like this, and he would say, "Why are you wearing them raggedy clothes with all the money we make?" And he already passed. I said, "I wish he was living. He would know I paid $69 for these raggedy pants. I could've went to the second hand store, split them myself like I used to do." I found out everything we used to have is now coming back.

Bill Barry:

Did your grandfather ever talk to you about working in Sparrows Point?

Rita Hamlet:

Yes, he did. Me and him talked. He worked there. And my grandfather would get up three o'clock in the morning and feed us breakfast, and say, "Shh," then make us go back to bed. And then he would go in to Bethlehem Steel. But I worked on the steel side. He worked in the shipyard.

Bill Barry:

Okay.

Rita Hamlet:

But I came home with my helmet on and my uniforms, and he would hug me. He was so proud of me. Yeah. Down there, when I first went, they had a bathroom. And the bathroom said, "Black. White." The little white guy... We was friends... And I say, "This is white, and you're not white." I say, "And this is black, and I'm not black." I said, "So what's our bathroom?" A foreman said to me, "You should've thought of that before you got here." I say, "No, you should've thought of it before you hired me." So I said, "I'm going in the white one." The next day I went in there, and then I came back the next week, and they had changed to Women and Men. So they changed it.

Bill Barry:

Had you always been a fighter?

Rita Hamlet:

Always. Even growing up, I had two sisters younger than me, and if they got in trouble or got in a fight, and they came home crying, my mother would say, "Well, how come you not crying?" I say, "Ma, because she wouldn't keep her mouth shut." Then my mother would beat me. So if you mess with my sisters, I'm going to jump right in it because I'd rather fight you than go upstairs, and my mother beat me. No, thank you. Uh-uh (negative). And believe me, I loved that job.

Bill Barry:

So, when you first started, how did you get there? Did you have a car, or did you take the bus?

Rita Hamlet:

When I first started, I would catch a cab to Federal Street, and would go in a cut-rate, buy a bag of chips, and put it in the bag, and hold the bag out, and a car would stop. I said, "I'm going to Bethlehem Steel." And that's how the guy would take me, and bring me. And then he started picking me up every day at my door, taking me to work, charging me $10 a week. And my son said, "Ma, why you riding with him?" I said, "Because $10 a week? I'd buy more than that in gas."

Bill Barry:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Rita Hamlet:

Plus he picked up two or three other people.

Bill Barry:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Rita Hamlet:

So that's how I got there first.

Bill Barry:

Because the guy had a little van service on the side.

Rita Hamlet:

Yeah.

Bill Barry:

Did he work there?

Rita Hamlet:

He worked at Bethlehem Steel.

Bill Barry:

Okay. Yeah. He just picked up a little bit extra, yeah.

Rita Hamlet:

And I met guys that told me... The guy say, "Look, Rita." He say, "Go to the bank, and open up a bank account, and get your check direct deposit, and you won't have to pay for Micky's to cash your check." And I said, "I don't need no man telling me what to do with my money." Guess what? I ain't got a check since. Because soon as I got the money, I thought it was mine, and I would buy everything I wanted. No, I had it put in direct deposit. I don't pay Wells Fargo. They come through the bank and get their money. I don't pay the bills. I went to him. I said, "Tell me what to do." He drove me in his car to the bank. I had my check sent straight to the bank. And I saved money. I didn't have to write a check, mail the stamp. I didn't have to do none of that.

Bill Barry:

But you didn't get to go to Mickey's.

Rita Hamlet:

Yeah. I would stop at Mickey's because everybody was stopping. We would play cards at Micky's.

Bill Barry:

It was a huge community off the site.

Rita Hamlet:

Oh, yes. Micky's was good. You could go in there and get all kind of food and everything. And it was a good deal in there.

Bill Barry:

And he was the first guy to cash paychecks for black workers.

Rita Hamlet:

That's right. Micky's. And his sons and them. And it was good. It was a good place.

Bill Barry:

And so, when you were on the ore dock, were you on shift work? Or were you...

Rita Hamlet:

No, I was on shift. I worked three shifts. But I switched a shift.

[SHORT BREAK]

Rita Hamlet:

Okay. So...

Bill Barry:

Shift work.

Rita Hamlet:

I did shift work, but I had five children.

Bill Barry:

Yeah.

Rita Hamlet:

And there was a guy. He hated daylight. So when I worked 3:00 to 11:00, me and him would switch. He'd work daylight. So he worked all my 3:00 to 11:00s, and I worked all his daylights.

Bill Barry:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Rita Hamlet:

So I could get home when my kids got out of school.

Bill Barry:

How tough was it with five kids and shift work?

Rita Hamlet:

It was tough. But 11:00 to 7:00, they'd be in bed.

Bill Barry:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Rita Hamlet:

I got off at 7:00, but not really because we created our own shift, 6:00 to 2:00, 2:00 to 10:00, and 10:00 to 6:00. So I participated in that, and I could make it home. And let me tell you, when I first got hired, I didn't like the job. I was scared. I said, "Wait a minute." I got hired in May. I said, "Wait. I'm going to send my kids to summer camp." I said, "Then I'm going to quit." They went to summer camp. Then I said, "Wait a minute." I said, "School getting ready to start up. I need school clothes." I said, "Wait a minute. Now it's getting ready to be Christmas." Then my kids grew up. I said, "Why are you still going to that God-forsaken job? The kids is grown." I said, "Because you got to eat, Dummy." I said, "Oh, yeah, that's right." And that's what made me keep going. Because guess what? The money. I made more money than people that I knew. [ringing phone] I'm not going to answer.

Bill Barry:

So, when you started, were you involved at all? Did you see any presence of the union at all? Was there a steward down that ore dock?

Rita Hamlet:

Well, the first union person I met was Ed Bartee.

Bill Barry:

Okay.

Rita Hamlet:

And it was other union people. I had put in another application, and I switched from the ore dock, and I went to the cold sheet mill. And I worked there for a few years. And all the guys were transferring. And I would go to them. "Why you all transferring?" He said, "Because the more you make, the more you'll get in your pension." So I transferred with them. From there I went to the place called the ladle treatment station.

Bill Barry:

Okay. What did you do in the ladle treatment station?

Rita Hamlet:

Well, at the ladle treatment station, when I went there, I was called a metallurgist.

Bill Barry:

Oh.

Rita Hamlet:

Yeah. And my job was, when the pot of hot molten lava came down, I would take a test. And whatever alloys was missing, it was my job to put the alloys in, make it hot as they wanted, and ship it out. The state came in one time and said, "Do you know your job?" I say, "Yes, sir." "Tell it to me in the shortest terms." I say, "To make it perfect, and ship it out on time." He said, "Oh, yeah, that's right."

Rita Hamlet:

And I did some things there. We had a crane. They were sending everybody home because the pipe would go up and down, but the crane... They couldn't get it to go back and forward. So I said, "Wait a minute." Pushed it, and it went. Pushed. I say, "Everybody on the ground, get off the ground." And I pushed it. And when it came back, when it got almost there, I dropped it, and it went in. And I could do it. And they said, "Hamlet, can you work over a double?" I said, "Oh, no, sir. I've got five children and a husband. I've got to go home." And I would say, "All these men. You all didn't think of that?"

Rita Hamlet:

Then even, one time... When it stopped coating steel on top of the furnace, all the coating would turn into breeze, and it would fly all over the place. So one day they said, "Well, Hamlet, you go up there, and fill up three bags." I went up there. And you try to pick it up. It would blow all over the place. So I saw a water line, and I saw a long piece of cardboard in a tube. I stuck it to the water line, and I wet the whole thing, opened up four bags, filled them up. Opened up four more bags, four more bags. I did 15 bags.

Rita Hamlet:

And I came downstairs and sit on the bench and start going to sleep. The foreman said, "Hamlet, if you didn't fill up three bags, I'm sending you home." I said, "Yes, sir." Laid on back. He came back down the steps. Him and the general foreman. And they said, "Hamlet, go to the showers. Don't even punch out. We got you." The men say, "What did you do? You're always doing something." I say, "No, you figure it out." And I went on. Because I thought I had to outwork the men.

Bill Barry:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Rita Hamlet:

Because I was a woman, and they wasn't going to keep me. And I never, ever had a job that paid that. I'm telling you, when I worked for the phone company, that's where... Steel took out more taxes than the phone company paid me.

Bill Barry:

Right.

Rita Hamlet:

And I learned how- the man told me how to do. I put my check in direct deposit. I took out so much a week. They would take it out automatically and send it to the credit union. When I retired, they sent me a check. And the government sent the letter. Said, "If you cash this check, we want 30%." I said, "30%." I said, "That's about $18,000." I said, "Oh, no." So I didn't take the check. I put it in the credit union. Then I turned 70. They sent me another letter. "If you don't start spending the money by the time you 70 years and six months, we..." I said, "Oh, when I wanted to buy everything under the sun, you all wouldn't let me spend it. Now that I want to save it, you going to make me spend it." Life changes on you.

Bill Barry:

Well, you came in at an exciting time at Sparrows Point because the consent decree had just been finished. Did you hear discussions about that, and arguments, at all at work?

Rita Hamlet:

Yeah, they told me that the government wrote that every 100 people that they hired, 25 had to be black or women. So I knew when they hired me it was two checks instead of one. So I said, "That's why you all hired me." But one thing they didn't know, that all my life I've had to be a good worker. Even with my mother, you had to make the bed, clean the bathroom, wash the dishes from breakfast before you left out to go to school in the morning.

Rita Hamlet:

They would have little conferences and meetings about the women. When I first got there, some of the people wouldn't even speak to you. And I couldn't understand why because I come from a multi-race of people. My brother's wife a white girl. I don't care. Me and her's friends. My daughter is married to a Hebrew, a Jewish man. If you come to our family reunion, hey. So I couldn't understand them, but I made friends with this Caucasian lady, and she told me they were taught not to speak to black people.

Bill Barry:

You don't remember her name, do you?

Rita Hamlet:

Gosh. I helped her. It might come to me.

Bill Barry:

That's okay.

Rita Hamlet:

Because her nephew died. She said they didn't have any money to bury him. I went all over Bethlehem Steel, taking up a collection, and I was nine dollars short of being $700. And I put the nine dollars to it, and she had $700.

Bill Barry:

Great.

Rita Hamlet:

And then more people spoke to me. And even one day we had kiddies' day. You could bring your children. And we had cookies, and there was no more cookies. And one of the guys' little granddaughter was with him. He said, "She wanted some of the cookies." I said, "We don't have anymore." I said, "But I got a surprise." Because I had put four cookies in my napkin. I said, "You can have my cookies." Like that. And then me and him got tight. And I didn't understand about racism. I didn't understand it.

Rita Hamlet:

But I remember when me and my kids, we went away to South Carolina, and we stopped and stayed in a hotel. And when we went to the swimming pool, all the people in the swimming pool got out. But my youngest daughter, she got in the pool, and a little white girl got in the pool with her. And they was playing and doing... And after that, then they start getting back in the pool. They was children the same age, and they was playing together.

Rita Hamlet:

I didn't even understand about racism. I even went down Lombard Street one time and bought a hamburger and sit at the thing. I said, "No, I don't want it to go. I want to eat it here." And the lady asked the man could I eat the burger there. And he said no. I said, "Well, never mind. I don't want it." I said, "Because my mother wouldn't let me walk up and down the street eating food." We couldn't do that as children. Some people would walk on the back of their shoes. No. At my mother's house, you had to put your foot in your shoe and tie them up.

Rita Hamlet:

So I didn't even understand about that until, really, that I got hired at Bethlehem Steel. I had a guy. We retired. We had a party. One time he said to me, "Where you from?" I said, "What you mean?" He said, "Because you..." I had freckles. I said, "Well, did you ever think maybe you were part black? Not that I'm part white." He didn't speak to me in over 20 years. Then we had a retirement party. He say, "And in walked one of the prettiest women I've ever seen." I said, "Me? You ain't spoke to me in 20 years. Now I'm one of the prettiest women you ever seen?" I say, "Man, come on, man. Come on. Come on, man." Because I didn't understand about that. Because I come from a multi-race family. I never was aware of it or anything like that.

Bill Barry:

So, did you start talking to the other women? The Women of Steel started, and were you involved in that?

Rita Hamlet:

Oh, yeah. I started, and right now, to the day, I talk to Sharnetta [00:23:06]. I talk to Mary Rogers. I talk to Dee. They locked into my phone. I still call them. When Sparrows Point have a reunion, we'll all call each other and pick each other up so we could all go to the reunion. And they was giving out a food bank. I'd go there and help give out some of the food through the union and stuff like that. Yeah.

Bill Barry:

And how did the other women deal with all this problem?

Rita Hamlet:

Well, sometimes we'd have a little circle, and we would talk, and stuff like that. I think the women that worked there got along better than the people that they worked for. That they worked for. I remember one time I had a supervisor. He came down. "You need a light put in there." I say, "No, sir. That's electrician's job. Not mine." He go get a light, put it in. Sparks started flying everywhere. I said, "Well, see, that's why I won't touch it. Because it's not my job."

Rita Hamlet:

And other little things, like one time out you either could go home or you could do labor. So I say, "I'll do some labor." And put on gloves. They say, "Hamlet, everywhere there's yellow." That mean it was safe to walk. He say, "Clean it." I got some bleach and some gloves, and sprayed it down. When the foreman came in that morning, he said, "Who worked here? Who was the laborer?" They said, "Rita." He said, "Rita, I know you did it. I know you." Because I would sweep up, pour bleach on the floor, mop it all up, stuff like that. So I believe that they felt like I was definitely a good worker.

Bill Barry:

Mm-hmm (affirmative).

Rita Hamlet:

And everywhere I went, I worked. Because if you work, time going to pass. If you sit around, time go slow.

Bill Barry:

And you were able to adjust your family life to the work, and...

Rita Hamlet:

Yes.

Bill Barry:

Obviously, with a big paycheck coming in, it was a [crosstalk 00:25:17] help.

Rita Hamlet:

Hey. I took all my children shopping at Kmart, Walmart, and I could buy everything for them for Christmas at one time. Not go lay it away, then go pay on it, and get it out.

Bill Barry:

Yeah.

Rita Hamlet:

So, believe me. They paid me well.

**Part Two**

Bill Barry:

We were just talking. Your neighbor came in, lost her job.

Rita Hamlet:

Yeah, she lost her job. But now, she went back. She started going to Morgan, trying to get a better education to get a better job.

Bill Barry:

Okay. You worked on the ore docks for three years?

Rita Hamlet:

Yes.

Bill Barry:

And then went into the coating mill?

Rita Hamlet:

No, when I left the ore dock then I went to the coke oven.

Bill Barry:

Coke oven. Sorry. What was it like there?

Rita Hamlet:

The coke oven? I'm going to tell you, the coke oven, I was scared up there because there was a guy years ago. The belt on the pile of steel broke, and the only thing you could see left of the man was his heels sticking up. I did not like the coke oven, because I just thought it was dangerous.

Bill Barry:

So for people who've never worked there, explain what the coke oven does.

Rita Hamlet:

Well the coke oven, it has to be hot and they melt the lava that come in from the ore dock. Then they will go to the coke oven and they would melt it. Then after the coke oven then it would go up to the steel making. Up in steel making, it was called later treatment, and that's what I finally transferred up there.

Rita Hamlet:

But, the coke oven, it was very, very hot at the coke oven, because they would cook the steel. They would make the little round balls, it would be molten lava and they would make it.

Bill Barry:

How long did you work there?

Rita Hamlet:

I only stayed there for probably seven months.

Bill Barry:

Okay. Traditionally the coke oven was a place where black workers worked, because it was the worst job in the mill.

Rita Hamlet:

It was hot and dangerous. It was mostly all black people except the supervisors.

Bill Barry:

Was Johnny Fair around when you were there?

Rita Hamlet:

Yes.

Bill Barry:

What was he like? He was a famous guy in the local.

Rita Hamlet:

Johnny Fair was a really nice guy, because he would tell me don't be scared. Put your armor of courage on. I would pull out my tube of lipstick and do like this, but Johnny Fair was good. He was really good.

Bill Barry:

And also real active in the union?

Rita Hamlet:

Oh yeah.

Bill Barry:

Then you went over to the steel side?

Rita Hamlet:

Yeah, I went to the steel side. Now, when I went to the steel side, this is what made me go to the steel side. We had gotten laid off, and while I was laid off, they called me back. I came back to work. They called me back right back to where I started.

Bill Barry:

On the ore dock?

Rita Hamlet:

Yeah. I said, "No, I don't belong in the ore dock."

Rita Hamlet:

They said, "Well, your department wouldn't take you back."

Rita Hamlet:

I said, "Why?" They didn't know. So I had a job. I started working it. Then three weeks later they said, "Hamlet report to your job." I called them. I said, "Why you all just sending me?"

Rita Hamlet:

He said, "We didn't even know you was back." He didn't know I was back. That's when I called Johnny Fair. They didn't know I was back. How they didn't know I was back?

Rita Hamlet:

Then when I went back to my department, where I had transferred to, there was a girl there working. Well, we worked, then she could get a vacation and I couldn't. I said, "Well wait a minute, how can she get a vacation? I've been here over 12 years."

Rita Hamlet:

"Because you were laid off."

Rita Hamlet:

But how was I laid off, and you hired her. I said "Something is not right." I said "That's all right though. My uncle work at the union hall and I'm getting ready to call him." I would tell them Johnny Fair was my uncle. "I'm going to call my uncle." So, they gave me a vacation.

Rita Hamlet:

They took two weeks, they had to give me a vacation. How does she get a job and I'm laid off? I said "I'm going to call my uncle and start a suit case against you." Every time I went to the union, and open up suit cases, every time I got paid, because I didn't understand how can you hire her and I'm laid off. How can you have an opening to move into, to be a metallurgist, but you give this girl the job, Mary Rogers, and I have more time than her.

Rita Hamlet:

And Mary say "Rita, they're just doing it to start conflict between us."

Rita Hamlet:

I say, "Well I'm not going to start conflict. I'm calling the union." They did give me the job and the next time the job opened then they gave it to Mary.

Bill Barry:

This was all in [Local] 2609?

Rita Hamlet:

Yes.

Bill Barry:

Johnny Fair was an officer of the local?

Rita Hamlet:

Right. Yes he was, and he was good.

Bill Barry:

How long did you then stay on the steel side?

Rita Hamlet:

Until I retired.

Bill Barry:

Until you retired?

Rita Hamlet:

Yes.

Bill Barry:

What changes did you see? Were there changes in the way that the steel was made or the way that the company treated people, because you were there when they went bankrupt.

Rita Hamlet:

Oh yeah. You know when they first hired me, they say they not going to be operating long. Well, it was long enough for me to stay there 29 years. But, and I found out why they shut down, which I was told that they owed the retirees over 15 million, and as long as they stayed in operation they would have to pay them. I was told that's why they shut down.

Bill Barry:

You mean went bankrupt.

Rita Hamlet:

Went bankrupt.

Bill Barry:

No, that's right.

Rita Hamlet:

Oh my goodness. Why would you owe the people, and making money, and not pay them. Then I was told when they shut down they made over $16 million selling the pots. I remember people coming from Pennsylvania to Sparrows Point to work, because my sister lived in Johnstown, Pennsylvania. I would see people, they said, "Oh, you work here now?" They worked up there, and I knew them, because my sister worked for the government up in Pennsylvania. It was like they shut them down first, and they shut, I think a Russian guy brought over the Sparrows Point.

Bill Barry:

Yeah. Severstal.

Rita Hamlet:

Yeah, and it didn't stay in existence too much longer.

Bill Barry:

Yeah. Well did you see decline while you were there? Mistakes that the company made or things they could have done differently?

Rita Hamlet:

Well, in my mind, I thought of some things they could have done different. But, I was a worker, so what I thought really didn't matter. Some of the stuff that you did, working doubles and all that. One time I went to work and I didn't get off for four days. We had a big blizzard, so by the time I made it to work, I stayed there four days and slept in the bath. That's when I worked double shifts every day. I mean I loved it because, hey, you work, you get time and a half if you stay over. Hey, I was getting time and a half for four days plus my regular time too. To me, Bethlehem Steel was the best thing that ever happened to me, because I had to learn things. I had to grow up there. I had to do what was expected of me.

Rita Hamlet:

I had a boss, I flushed him out. He was going to say, "Hamlet, do this, this."

Rita Hamlet:

I said "How are you going to tell me what to do and you sit in the air conditioned office all day. I'm down here sweating bullets? You ain't gonna to tell me what to do. Take your ass back upstairs to the office."

Rita Hamlet:

A friend of mine said "Rita, I heard they was going to fire you for 30 days with no pay because you were disrespectful to the superintendent."

Rita Hamlet:

I said, "Oh my God, what could I do?" I wrote their names down, so I would never forget. George [Molden]. So the day that I came back to work, I got an apple, a toothpick, tore off one sheet of toilet paper, put it on there and stuck it in it, and went up to his office doing like this, waving the white flag.

Rita Hamlet:

He said, "Hamlet, what do you want in my office?"

Rita Hamlet:

I say "Boss, I came to apologize for yesterday. But it was really your fault."

Rita Hamlet:

He said, "How was it my fault of what came out your mouth?"

Rita Hamlet:

I say, "Because boss, if you would have been white, I would have knew you was the boss. You was black. I thought you was my cousin."

Rita Hamlet:

He said, "Get yourself down on that job right now."

Rita Hamlet:

I say, "Yes, sir, boss." I ran down them steps. Every time I seen him, I say "Hi boss."

Rita Hamlet:

He said "Rita, you don't have to call me boss. I'm George [Molden]."

Rita Hamlet:

I said "Uh uh. So, I could forget that you're not my cousin? No. Hi boss." His wife passed away, I went to the funeral and he said, "Rita, I didn't know you were that much older than me."

Rita Hamlet:

I said "I never knew what your age was." But my birthday this year, I'll be 75, and his birthday two days after mine and now he'll be 69 and, he was the supervisor.

Bill Barry:

It's a whole different dynamic when blacks became supervisors also?

Rita Hamlet:

Oh yeah, it was. Everything was different. Even when I was there, you're waiting for the steel to come up, and some of the white ladies would be reading books or doing something, polishing their fingernails. The boss came up to me one day, I was reading a book, "We don't pay you to read a book."

Rita Hamlet:

I said, "Well, she's reading her book.", and he just walked away. I would take the direction book to tell you how to operate the furnace and put the book in front of it so I would hide what I be doing. Stuff like that, I would hide.

Bill Barry:

Because the work there, there were pours. You didn't have anything to do?

Rita Hamlet:

Yeah, it was times-

Bill Barry:

You could just rest and take a nap or go to the bathroom.

Rita Hamlet:

I went to the bathroom once and the foreman came. You were in that bathroom for 15 minutes. I say, "Because boss, I had an accident, and I couldn't come out until I got myself straight." He came banging on the door. When he banged on the door, I threw him my underwear and showed them to him. Until I can get these clean and washed up, and I lined my jeans with paper towels, and then I came out. I said "I need to go to the nurses station." So they sent me to the nurses station. It was one of them times when your monthly came and I wasn't suspecting it. Yeah, he was grumpy.

Bill Barry:

So, you stayed on the steel side for the rest of your time down there?

Rita Hamlet:

For the rest of my time.

Bill Barry:

Any other union activities you participated in? Were you ever an officer or a steward?

Rita Hamlet:

Oh no. It was always Ed Bartee, and then it was Eddie Bartee. Ed Bartee, one time, I don't even know if I'm supposed to tell this. I went to Jamaica and when I came from Jamaica I had brought marijuana back with me. And I got arrested at the airport and the judge sent me to Jessup's Cut. I stayed in there 11 months.

Bill Barry:

What year was this?

Rita Hamlet:

That was in '83, and the lady who was the parole, the lady who came to see if you could make parole, she said, "Did you have a job before?"

Rita Hamlet:

I say, "Yes ma'am, Bethlehem Steel."

Rita Hamlet:

She said, "Oh no, I'm getting you out of here." So I made parole and I got out and I went down to Bethlehem Steel. They say "We sent for you and you didn't respond so you no longer work here."

Rita Hamlet:

I say "You didn't send for me, because I ain't get no paperwork from you." So, I went to Ed Bartee, and Ed Bartee helped me fight to get my job back. But I got on a bus and I went to a place called Five Gateway Center. I went in there, talked to the lady, Mr. Bartee told me to go there.

Rita Hamlet:

She said, "Well the supervisor's not here, so you come back tomorrow because we're getting ready to close."

Rita Hamlet:

I said, "Well miss, I'm going to sleep on the sofa, because I don't have anywhere to go. I only have bus fare back home." They gave me a voucher, I went to the hotel, another voucher I can eat. I came back and I sit on the steps of the union until they opened up. I talked to the guy, and I had my paperwork when they released me and he gave me a letter and I took it back to Ed Bartee.

Rita Hamlet:

Ed say, "Did you read the paper?"

Rita Hamlet:

I said, "No sir, because the envelope was sealed with tape on it." He let me read it, and the letter said, "I want you to do everything possible to get our sister her job back." In the union hall, this was a Caucasian guy. This was a white guy. He didn't treat me no different. He hugged me. They gave me $100 to put in my pocket. They bought me a bus ticket back home.

Bill Barry:

This was at the International Steel Workers office?

Rita Hamlet:

Yes.

Bill Barry:

Gateway Center?

Rita Hamlet:

Yes.

Bill Barry:

Okay. That's great. Do you remember who the guy was?

Rita Hamlet:

No, and I kept meaning to call people and say "Ed, Mr. Bartee, because I've always stayed in contact with him and his wife and then he got sons. Eddie, he became just shop steward at Sydney Union Shop, so I was always in contact with them. Whenever they had a fair or anything, I'd always show up and go, because I know what they did for me and my kids. Got me my job back and guess what? Sometimes I still cry when I think of that, that they was on my side. Yeah, I made a mistake. The judge sent me to jail, and really I thought he was racist and prejudiced, because it was marijuana. It came from the land, just sending me to jail for what?

Rita Hamlet:

But I had to grow up and found out it was an illegal drug and the judge say "You didn't go to North Carolina or New York."

Rita Hamlet:

I said "Judge, if I knew somebody in North Carolina, in New York, I just went to Jamaica for a party and how much we was paying for it. This much. They was giving you that much for the same amount, American money. But I had to find out, $10 in American money, was 2 or 300 dollars in their money. But, I learned and they sent me to drug rehab and March the 11th I celebrated 31 years without a drink or a drug.

Bill Barry:

Okay. Congratulations.

Rita Hamlet:

Even the union said, "Hamlet, if you come in here one more time with a dirty urine, I'm going to get you fired."

Rita Hamlet:

I said to him, "I was on vacation. How are you going to tell me what to do when I'm on vacation?"

Rita Hamlet:

He said, "Well, let me ask you a question. When you were on vacation, did you get a check from Bethlehem Steel?"

Rita Hamlet:

I say, "Yeah, I got my vacation check."

Rita Hamlet:

He said, "Then we'll tell you what to do when you're on vacation."

Rita Hamlet:

I said, "Okay, yes sir." I thought you were on vacation. You can do anything you want.

Bill Barry:

So, Bethlehem Steel did drug testing? Urine tests?

Rita Hamlet:

Yes. They used to do urine tests. In the end they would shave the hair off the back of your neck or from under your arms, and they would test the hair. Because I have went to take a urine test and got urine from somebody else and put it in a bottle, and when I get in the bathroom, pour it in there, in the bottle. Then they started shaving hair from people. So I had to go to the union and said "I came to get honest with y'all." That guy who worked with the people, his name was Bill Pearson and the other guy, he worked for the union and he's always sending me texts all the time. He said- they sent me to drug rehab up in Pennsylvania, and March the 11th I celebrated 31 years without a drink or drug.

Bill Barry:

Congratulations, that's great. So when did you start-?

Rita Hamlet:

Pete Ross. That was his name. Pete Ross.

Bill Barry:

Did you ever work with Lee Douglas?

Rita Hamlet:

Yeah.

Bill Barry:

Remember when I met you last week, he was one who was honored, but he was really started the civil rights movement at Sparrow's Point.

Rita Hamlet:

Right. Yeah. I think he was way much older than me. I think he might be in the 90s.

Bill Barry:

Yes. 92 now.

Rita Hamlet:

Oh, 92. God bless him.

Bill Barry:

He was a fighter.

Rita Hamlet:

Oh, yes.

Bill Barry:

It's his story in the book. What was it like then bringing up the younger women when they come in? What did you tell them?

Rita Hamlet:

Well, a lot of times I have to remind them, remember why you here. You didn't come here to get a friend. You came here to work a job, to get income, to go home and raise your family. Because you know, some things, it's an incident like that happened with me, and I don't want to tell these people's names, but we were in the little room where everybody go waiting for the steel. The room was all glass and the girl told the guy, "You need to take your black ugly tail and sit it down."

Rita Hamlet:

I stood, and I could see the look on his face, because it was only three black people in there, and everybody started laughing. I went over to him, grabbed his arm. I said, "Excuse me, don't be talking to my boyfriend like that." I said, "Come on sweetie, let's go," and me and him left out like that. I said, "I know you was hurt. I could see it in your face."

Rita Hamlet:

He came back to work the next day, brought me a gold bracelet, a gold necklace, and an envelope with two $50 bills in it. He said, "You stood up for me, I was scared." But I went to her and had to talk to her. I said, "You hurt his feelings in front of other people." And when we came to the Henrietta Lacks thing, him and her walked in together, because all of us then became friends, and me and her talk on the phone right now to today, we talk on the phone.

Bill Barry:

One of the questions I always ask people at the end of the interviews is whether you were closer to the people you worked with than you were to your own family and you just told an example of why, how that is.

Rita Hamlet:

Yeah, but I know I got close to the people because we build bonds. A girl having a cookout Saturday, "Rita, come on, it's going to be most of my family. You can bring whoever you want." You know Mary Rogers, her son got killed on the same corner my great-nephew got killed. They were talking together and just a drive by. You know, we cry together. We go to the cemetery together. I'm always talking to her. Right now she's going through something and I just hope they can find who's missing. I meant to give her two or three days before I call her back and say "Alright, she shown up yet?"

Bill Barry:

What was it like when you started thinking about leaving? What made you think about retiring?

Rita Hamlet:

Well, I had started a little business on my own. I had a house around the corner, and I had started assisted living, taking care of older people, like my mother, my father, my mother's sister. I was getting calls from places. Then I had bought this house, and it was like, "Okay, I could really start my business off and running." When they offered us the $50,000 to leave early, they told me, "Rita, you have the time to go but you don't have the age," because I think you had to be 60 to get your pension, and 62 to get your Social Security.

Rita Hamlet:

I said, "Okay, I'm 58. Put my check in the mail."

Rita Hamlet:

"All right." So that's when I left. I'm getting ready to be 75, I've been getting my check almost 15 years, and from Social Security also, although they said if you stay until you get this age, you'll get more.

Rita Hamlet:

But I added it up. This is how much I'm getting now, $1400 from Social Security. If I wait two more years, I'm only going to get 300 more dollars. Look how much I'm giving up? Over $16,000 to get three more hundred? No, I'm gone. That's why I left because I've always hated to see old people, and young children not clean. I don't like that. I always want to take care of them, do their hair, polish their nails. The clothes I don't wear no more they could have. I've always done stuff like that for older people, little children in my neighborhood. It was a group of guys, they were little boys. Their mother would let them off on the corner, and I found out later she had an addiction, but I would take them in my house, strip them down, wash their clothes, put them in the laundry room sink and wash them off.

Rita Hamlet:

Then I'd go to the Good Wills, St. Vincent DePaul, buying secondhand clothes, washing them and dressing them. As they got older, they begin hanging on the corner and I would say "Y'all, can't hang on this corner. You know I can't keep seeing this, and if the state come and y'all out here."

Rita Hamlet:

Right now, to this day they defend me. Get off of Momma Rita's corner. Don't hang on Momma Rita's. I have cook outs and invite everybody in the whole community. I don't eat beef, I don't eat pork. September just passed me 50 years, but I cook turkey burgers. I make them on my own. I'll cook grilled chicken, and I buy chicken hot dogs and invite everybody.

Rita Hamlet:

Because when I first got married, I really couldn't cook. So, I went to school of culinary arts. So, now I could cook. My mother and father were interior decorators, so I understood how to decorate a house, but I did not understand how to dress. My husband taught me that. "Rita, you don't wear a yellow shirt and purple pants and green shoes out. No, you don't." I learned that you dress your body just like you decorate your house.

Bill Barry:

Did he work at Sparrows Point?

Rita Hamlet:

No, he didn't. He worked at National Brewery. They made beer.

Bill Barry:

Right. What was it like the first day you retired? You wake up and you don't have to go back down to Sparrow's Point?

Rita Hamlet:

Well, probably the first couple of days I was all right. I was relaxing, but the first couple of months, I was bored. You're polishing to polish, you furniture polished yesterday. Why are you doing it again? You're Windexing the mirrors and the pictures. Why? You already did it. I wanted my job. I called my boss. I say, "Look, I'm sorry I didn't mean to retire. Can you hire me back?"

Rita Hamlet:

He would laugh. I said "I didn't mean to, because then there was nothing to do and no where to go. But I took on a thing that I go to Montebello Lake every day. Rain, sleet, snow, hail. I'll walk that lake every day. I've even walked down when the snow, they clean Greenmount, I'll park at Giant, walk to Greenmount to North and back up. People be honking "Miss Rita, where your car? You all right?"

Rita Hamlet:

I said, "Girl, I'm looking for a man. You can't find no man in no car. You gotta start walking," and they will laugh.

Bill Barry:

Did you ever see the retirees cookouts at Lake Montebello?

Rita Hamlet:

Oh, yeah.

Bill Barry:

It's been years since I was walking around once, and Bartee was over there and had a grill. They had guys- it was a real, they did it once a month.

Rita Hamlet:

I'd always go there. I would always bring potato salad, or macaroni and cheese, and bake cakes and take them. Oh yeah. Thomas Thompson, Mr. Thompson, Ed Bartee, everybody. I would always be there. Yeah.

Bill Barry:

It's the northeast part of Baltimore City. There were a lot of steelworkers living here.

Rita Hamlet:

Right. Dennis Thompson, he lived on Wolf Street. Ed Bartee, before they moved they lived around the corner. You know everybody, we'd have a little cookout.

Bill Barry:

You still stay in touch with them, which is great.

Rita Hamlet:

Yeah, I still stay in touch with them.

Bill Barry:

Well, I don't think I need to ask you this, but if you're going to do it again, would you go back to Sparrow's Point?

Rita Hamlet:

Yes. I would go back to Sparrow's Point. I would take some of my kids with me. Yeah. Cause my oldest son, man, he would have been 59 but he died.

Bill Barry:

Because it's tough to find those jobs with those paychecks anymore you got down there.

Rita Hamlet:

Yeah, and the union was so good and everything was so- I would even bring food down there, sell it at lunchtime, because the only place was the little restaurant across the street. It was inside the mill, but I didn't like the food. I like soft things, they would fry them too hard and stuff like that. Oh, I would definitely get my job back. Definitely.

Bill Barry:

Any other last stories? You ever seen any bad accidents down there?

Rita Hamlet:

The one when-

Bill Barry:

The guy died.

Rita Hamlet:

Yeah, when the handle on the crane broken and that guy couldn't get out of there fast enough. I seen another guy, his hand got hooked under the thing and he lost his hand. I've seen some things, and I still call him. I'll still call and talk to them. How you doing and stuff.

Bill Barry:

Okay. Well great. Thank you very much.

Rita Hamlet:

So welcome.