



LILLY LEDBETTER INTERVIEW
MAKERS: WOMEN WHO MAKE AMERICA

Lilly Ledbetter, Activist
June 16, 2011
Interviewed by: Nina Alvarez
Total Running Time: 1 hour and 43 minutes

START TC: 00:00:00:00

ON SCREEN TEXT:
Life Stories Presents

00:00:04:00

INTERVIEWER:
Okay, great. Okay. Great.

ON SCREEN TEXT:
Lilly Ledbetter Activist

00:00:10:00

INTERVIEWER:
Tell me about your family. Where'd you grow up? What was your family like?

00:00:16:00

LILLY LEDBETTER:



I grew up in rural Alabama as an only child of my parents. And during the years that I was growing up, my grandmother on my father's side lived in our home and—with us—and I got a little special attention, but life was really hard because my parents had grown up during the years of the Depression and had very little. And they struggled, and it was hard times. So, jobs were hard to get, and when my father did get a job, he made a dollar a day back in the early 40s. And then he got drafted during World War II, served in the Navy, and returned home and went to school on the GI Bill and became a mechanic. And then, he worked for the government for their next—all of his career then.

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INTERVIEWER:

But you stayed in rural Alabama.

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LILLY LEDBETTER:

We stayed in rural Alabama. I lived there and went to a rural school and then moved—uh—in my senior years, I went to the high school in Jacksonville and because our school only went to ninth grade. But as a young child I had to walk five miles to just to be able to catch a bus early on and it was just so rural and it was really hard, and I was the...I spent a lot of time just trying to get an education.

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INTERVIEWER:

What happened after the ninth grade?

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LILLY LEDBETTER:

After ninth grade, I went to Jacksonville High School for the next, the buses carried the students in. And we were, we went in and for the next three years and I graduated then from Jacksonville high school in 1956.

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INTERVIEWER:

What were your parents' expectations for you? I mean, they actually, you know, they were a product of the Depression. What did they expect for you?

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LILLY LEDBETTER:

They—my mother always hammered into me to get a good education, get the most education that I possibly could get, because her mother had died when she was 15 and she had to drop out of school. Actually, she only ever got to go to school through the sixth grade. And she knew that education was lacking in her life and what it had held her back. So she wanted me to get the very most and the very best education, and always give my best.

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LILLY LEDBETTER:

And during those growing up years, she felt that I needed to learn a work ethic, because growing up in rural Alabama, when your parents were farmers, mine were not farmers, but they were struggling, and my grandfather, we lived next door to him, and he had a farm. He was raising cotton and corn and hay, and all of those types, things on the farm that you normally do.

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INTERVIEWER:

So you worked on the farm?

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LILLY LEDBETTER:

I did. It wasn't my choice. My mother felt like I needed to learn a work ethic. And even in summer, when school was out, she would get me up at 6 a.m. so we could get to her big garden and gather vegetables and produce to bring back home and to prepare to can or freeze for the winter months. And no. There was never no slack time because you always had something to do.

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INTERVIEWER:

Do you remember thinking it was a good thing or a bad thing to be a girl? Was that even an issue at that time?

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LILLY LEDBETTER:

I didn't really think about being a girl as being set apart, but I knew there were not as many opportunities for girls as for men, as for boys.

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INTERVIEWER:

How did you know that?

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LILLY LEDBETTER:

Just the observance of the people in the community and the cities when we'd go into town, the people that were friends with my parents—they—the men always had the good jobs, the big jobs. The women were like secretaries or clerks. And I knew that there were few opportunities for women and for girls early on. And I always watched what little news that I could get, you know, in my early years. For a lot of years, we didn't have a newspaper. We didn't have any magazines. We only got magazines that were handed to us, handed down from someone else. We did have a radio in the early years. And then when my father went to work for the government later, we were one of the first people in our community to own a television. So that helped to educate me as to what was out there in the bigger world.

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INTERVIEWER:

And what were you seeing out there in the bigger world, you know—if you're—in Rural Alabama?

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LILLY LEDBETTER:

In the bigger world, actually, the men still had the best jobs, the best pay, and the best opportunities compared to what the women were having and being able to get. But my mother always continued to tell me to get the best and the education that I could. And going to Jacksonville High School back then was almost like going to college today because the teachers I had were so inspiring. And I was good with math, and so I had the greatest math teacher that I believe that was ever alive on earth, Mrs. Sale in Jacksonville, Alabama. And I would take every class that she would teach, no matter how hard. In the last year that I was at Jacksonville, I took the early algebra for college which she was preparing us to be into college later, and I loved it. I loved it. And I set my goals high and really wanted to amount to something more than just being a housewife in my lifetime

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INTERVIEWER:

What did you invent for yourself?

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LILLY LEDBETTER:

I envisioned that the world would offer more opportunities for women because I knew that women had so many skills. Just what my mother did at home, even though she didn't work outside, she was a good organizer, a good manager, and she worked hard. There were no minutes or hours of the day that was slack. We worked hard all day. And I would think, you know, I'm an only child. I shouldn't have to do this. I shouldn't have to be working in this cotton field. It doesn't even belong to my parents.

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LILLY LEDBETTER:

And I hated it. I really hated it, it was so hot. My cousin worked along with me. She was required to as well. And we would fuss about how when we grew up and got older, we would never marry a farmer. And as soon as we could get out of the rural section of Alabama, we were leaving rural Alabama. We wanted no part of it.

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INTERVIEWER:

Where did you see yourself going? What was your—when you would have these conversations with your cousin, what did you think—if you had a picture in your mind of where you would be that was not here in rural Alabama, what did you see?

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LILLY LEDBETTER:

I didn't envision exactly where I would be, but I was reading where women were getting into all different areas of jobs where they had never been before, even though they still were not treated as they should be with respect and the pay and the benefits, they still were getting into them. And I envisioned myself as being maybe a lawyer or an engineer.

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LILLY LEDBETTER:

I'm thinking, well, my math skills are so good and so outstanding, maybe I can be an engineer someday. I set my goals really high, and I still believe people should do that and envision success, because I believe if you envision success you will be successful.

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INTERVIEWER:

After high school, did you leave? What happened after high school?

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LILLY LEDBETTER:

After high school, I married early right out of high school and I married a man that he and I had been friends for all through school and we had met when I was about 14 and he was 17 and we liked each other and we became best



friends and then we loved each other and we got married and my family said, oh you're getting married too early, too young. I was 17 and he was 21. Or 20 at the time, and they thought it would not work out. But it did, and we later, three years later, we had two children, and our life revolved around our family and what we could do for them that their lives would be better than what we had had.

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INTERVIEWER:

So at that point, there was no college in your plan?

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LILLY LEDBETTER:

Not at that time, no. Because I couldn't see any financial way to get into college because my mother said we didn't have money for college and in those years there was not any financial aid or assistance to help someone to get into college. So I immediately went to work for General Electric when I got out of high school. They had a plant near where I lived. My husband worked there and it was a great job. They worked a lot of overtime and back in those days minimum wage was so low and they paid much more. I worked there for 18 months before getting laid off due to the plant closing, but we were able to save enough money that we built us a house, a small house, and then three years after being married, we started our family then.

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INTERVIEWER:

What did you do at General Electric?

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LILLY LEDBETTER:

I was a union worker and on a line that my job was to weld the little filaments in tubes. And that's what happened to that plant. The tubes were no longer needed later for radios and TVs and with the advancement of technology then the tubes were done away with so that plant was closed.

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INTERVIEWER:

You started your family?

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LILLY LEDBETTER:

Started.

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INTERVIEWER:

And you left the workforce, essentially, for...

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LILLY LEDBETTER:

I did.

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INTERVIEWER:

Tell me about that. What did you dedicate yourself to for 10 years?

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LILLY LEDBETTER:

I dedicated myself to my children and my family. I did a lot I loved to bake, and I'd bake for people and cook and do things with the children. And we'd bake Easter rabbit cakes every year: we'd have each for one of them. I had two children, so I'd make a coconut one for my daughter and a chocolate one for my son. And we do all sorts of little trips and excursions. And I fell right back into the mode of being my mother's example. I was having a garden and putting away vegetables for the winter and cooking in the summer and entertaining friends and always trying new recipes and new dishes and keeping my house spotless. In fact, I used to say in those days I even had my doorknobs polished. Which I found out later it didn't matter if they were polished or not. But that was carrying it a little bit far, but I did. I was a true housekeeper and homemaker and fell right into it. But after a few years at home, I realized that we needed more money to be able to educate our children and to give them and provide for them. And I was ready to get back in the workforce.

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INTERVIEWER:

How important was earning money for you as a woman?

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LILLY LEDBETTER:

Very important. Money is, I've been told by one of my former bosses that I had a hangup about money. And I think I did because in the early years my mother, if I wanted a bicycle for example, it was always we didn't have the money. And as a small child or a teenager, to me that meant that we must not have any money for groceries or for food or for the electric bill. And I worried about money as a child and I didn't get the full explanation what she meant that we only didn't have money for the bicycle. And the fact of going to college, we lived in the rural section and I would have needed transportation or I would've had to stay in town and she just meant that they didn't have the money for me to be able to do that.

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LILLY LEDBETTER:

And it was—it added a very difficult hardship. And I had never been out of that rural Alabama area except for just small, short trips. So my husband and I, when he went into the military, for example, he was stationed in Fort Belvoir, Virginia, and I wanted to take a week off from work and go up and visit. My boss told me I couldn't go, and I said, well, I feel I need to go. I'll be



gone this week, but I will be back Monday week. I really expected to lose my job. But I was so determined that that's what I wanted to do. But when I flew into Washington, D.C., to get the bus out to Fort Belvoir, my husband had failed to tell me that it was a city bus.

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LILLY LEDBETTER:

And so my bus line thinking was Greyhound or Trailway. So I get on one of those, that I find out that the bus is going by the base. But I didn't ask if it stopped or not. So I get on this I don't remember which line, but I got on one of the bus lines, and when I look over to the right and I see the Fort Belvoir going by, I ask the driver, I said, "I must get off." And he said, "we don't stop, lady." I said "I have to get off." So he did stop and let me off of the interstate with my luggage, and it cost as much for me to get a cab to get on base as it cost for me to fly from Atlanta, Georgia to Washington, D.C. But that's the fact of growing up in rural Alabama, never being exposed to travel and knowing the difference between the buses. I'd never seen a city bus. So I grew up quite rapidly.

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INTERVIEWER:

What job was that?

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LILLY LEDBETTER:

That was when I worked at General Electric. I got back to Alabama the following weekend. I went back to my job on Monday and I did have a job. I've not been fired for taking off, I didn't have vacation, they shut down like most factories do certain times of the year. And that's when you got your vacation. I didn't get paid for the week, I did lose the money for the week, but it was so important for me to go and visit my husband and see the military base and to be a part of that and I did. So I learned early on that determination is a big factor of who I am and to stand up for what I really believe. Even though I was facing the possibility of losing my job, I still made that trip.

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LILLY LEDBETTER:

And I had a lot of good lessons in life. It really taught me. I negotiated a plane ticket, got the best deal possible, and flew on one of the nicest planes that ever was, and had the great opportunity to see Washington, DC and Fort Belvoir, Virginia. And it was really a great experience.

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INTERVIEWER:

So that was the first time you were ever here in—

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LILLY LEDBETTER:

That's the truth.

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INTERVIEWER:

Okay. And you were only 20 years old?

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LILLY LEDBETTER:

Twenty years old.

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INTERVIEWER:

Let's fast forward to your second career, right, or the continuation of your career. You spent a long time at Goodyear. How did you get there?

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LILLY LEDBETTER:

That was a long journey to get there because Goodyear Tire and Rubber Company plant in Gadsden, Alabama was built in 1929. As a small child, when my parents finally got a car, we would go into Gadsden to visit my aunt and uncle on Sundays, and we would pass the plant. It would have workers' cars out front in the big clock tower was there. Very impressive. Looked like a cold place, hard work went on there, I knew that. I never wanted a job in any of those years. Early on when I went to work at General Electric, I didn't even give Goodyear a second thought.

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LILLY LEDBETTER:

But I never wanted a job with Goodyear until they built the radio division in Gadsden, Alabama in 1976. But for me to get there, the first job when I got back to work after being home for so many years, I went to work for H&R Block and I loved it because I took those math skills that I'd held all those years, never had used since I'd been out of school, and they excelled and my interpretations of the tax code, I learned it very quickly and advanced. And then when the tax season was over, I had been hired as a temporary employee for the tax season, but I was asked to stay full time. I debated it and I stayed full time. And my children went to a daycare in the summer, and they went to school in the fall, into the daycare center after school each day. And they participated in scouts and little league games and little cheerleading camps.

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LILLY LEDBETTER:

And they were able to do many things by me having gone back to work. My husband was disappointed that the cakes and the pies were not made in homemade rolls on the weekends, and those doorknobs were no longer polished and the floors shiny and the grass cut and the car washed by the time he got off on the weekend so he said I really should quit. We had a family meeting, the two children were old enough then and had experienced enough that they could help give some insight and they said do not quit. My little son



he said we can now eat hamburgers out. It was such a big deal. You know, so many things that we take for granted today, we didn't have back then. So they really wanted me to stay employed. And they chipped in and would help do the housework. They would clean their bathroom and pick up their rooms.

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LILLY LEDBETTER:

And it was quite educational for them and helpful education-wise for them to be able to look out after themselves. And they looked out after each other. I always stressed: you've got a brother and you've got a sister because I didn't have those luxuries. And I always felt it was so important to have family that you knew you had your back, would take care of you, and you could depend on. And that was important. So they really did. They were very, very close.

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INTERVIEWER:

So that was not a conflict for you. You were able to balance.

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LILLY LEDBETTER:

I did, I did. And I would skip my lunch period at the end of the day. I negotiated with my boss that if I didn't take my lunch hour, I could leave 30 minutes early in the afternoon. And that's what I did, so I could get to the daycare by the time they closed and pick up my children. And it was always negotiable. I learned early on.

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LILLY LEDBETTER:

I think the first job being in a union helped me and prepared me later to know that I could negotiate certain things in life and stand up for them. And that was good because my mother gave me the stamina and the determination in my early years to give me that fortitude that I could do that. And as much as I hated it, that was probably the best thing she ever did for me, putting me in that cotton patch.

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INTERVIEWER:

So tell me about your arrival at Goodyear once you had done—you were at H&R Block for 10 years?

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LILLY LEDBETTER:

I was at H&R Block over a 12 year period and what happened during those years they would have some cutbacks and then I was first I started out as an office manager and then later I was an assistant manager and then when the manager left in 1976 H&r Block came to Jacksonville State University and hired me from them to go back as the district manager.

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LILLY LEDBETTER:

And then I was a district manager for, from 1976 through 1970 and halfway through 1979. And then it was from there that I went to work at Goodyear. But I was with H&R Block and then they had to cut back and I went with the college and I was assistant financial aid director and I really loved that job.

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INTERVIEWER:

Which college was this?

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LILLY LEDBETTER:

Jacksonville State University.

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INTERVIEWER:

What did you do there?

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LILLY LEDBETTER:

I was assistant financial aid director which meant that I got to interview students, I got to process student loans, their paperwork, and my knowledge and my experience from accounting and the income tax background, I was able to process those papers very quickly because most of the time they were

based on their family's tax records. And that was very helpful and in those years the financial aid and grants and different monies, scholarships, was pouring in.

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LILLY LEDBETTER:

And we had a lot of money to spend, but it was very timely and it had to be done in a certain way and it was a great job, very rewarding to be able to keep students in college and a lot times a student would flunk out with their family's years of financial support and then they would come back knowing and having experienced life to know they had to have that education. They had to have that degree, but they had no money. And to be able to keep those students in school and for them to come back later and thank me for keeping them there. And then a lot of the students even in came in on partial scholarship.

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INTERVIEWER:

Did you take advantage of this environment? Did you go to college there as well?

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LILLY LEDBETTER:

I had some classes during those years and during my time of going back to going to work for H&R Block and taking the accounting and the income tax



preparation classes, first the beginning and then the advanced and then going through some classes with internal revenue and then go on into colleges — I've had courses from Auburn University, Georgia State Technical College, Jacksonville in the University of Alabama. And then later, when I got into management, I focused on the management skills because part of my job at the university was managing the student workers and placing them. And what I tried to do was put a student in a job that would be — that they would — the student would like and would be good at and might help them in future years to help them earn money, to help them in college.

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INTERVIEWER:

And how long did that last for you?

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LILLY LEDBETTER:

That lasted a little over three years. And then H&R Block came calling again and wanted me to take the district manager's position. And I did. I went back and the college tried to keep me, but they couldn't match what H&R Block had come up with. And of course, the money was the, uh, people say money is not a motivator. For me, it was. Money was a motivator because it meant. What you could, how far you could go and what you can do in your life and give you more advantages than before. And you'd also — it also provides me the opportunity to help other people. So I went back with H&R Block and then Goodyear built the radio division in 1976 in Gadsden. There was a lot of



publicity about their new management style. I knew having worked with people through the years that worked at Goodyear that it was very difficult work, it was hard, but no one ever complained about the company or their benefits or their treatment, but I knew it was hard. So when they...

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INTERVIEWER:

Hard in what sense? Like hard, difficult?

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LILLY LEDBETTER:

They were very strict, they didn't let people off except when they had vacations scheduled or if you were sick you were expected to still be at work and you had a quota: there was some piece work back in the early years. You had to do those certain number of pieces to get your earnings where you should be. So I knew it was very hard, but I knew that when the radio plant was built and the publicity came out in one of the leading business magazines about how Goodyear would have a new philosophy and a new technique in that radio division, and they would work more as teams and the team effort, that appealed to me because in management. And that's why so many companies use sports coaches and different teams around the nation in their training programs is to compare them to work in a company or an environment because it is a good production.

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INTERVIEWER:

Did they pay better?

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LILLY LEDBETTER:

They paid. Well, they paid better, but I had to take a pay cut when I first went to Goodyear. But they told me that I could make up my difference by working overtime because that was a unique company because they paid overtime for first-line managers because you were required to work when my peer had a heart attack, for example. In later years, he was out for many months. I worked every night, my shift and his too. When he took his vacation in personal time each year, I worked my shift, and his. So I worked a lot of overtime, so I was told that I could make up the difference in how much money I possibly would earn each year on overtime pay. So I decided that that was a great opportunity for me because I looked around and based on what I was talking with other people, I knew that Goodyear seemed to be a little behind schedule in having the number of required minorities and women on payroll that they should have in key positions.

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LILLY LEDBETTER:

And I knew I could excel there. I knew if I was given the opportunity that that would be a good move. So I started interviewing, I turned in a resume, and was interviewed over several months by all of the factory council, that being



about 12 people plus the man that worked with the union. And I had to have all votes from them, a vote positive from each one to be hired because they had had some bad experiences with bringing women and minorities in, and training them, and then when they were assigned to night shift, they'd leave.

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INTERVIEWER:

But you had a night shift.

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LILLY LEDBETTER:

I did. I knew that going in that it took about 25 years to write a day shift job. But by going into the radio division at the time we rotated, we worked three months first, three months second, and three months third, but I really liked night shift I really liked it because especially third shift, I didn't like second shift because I would get up and do too much at home and be tired when I got to work, but I liked third shift. So I'd usually trade my second shift time to someone for their third. So I worked three months first and then six months third shift.

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LILLY LEDBETTER:

So when you say you worked overtime, how many hours is that in a day?

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LILLY LEDBETTER:

That's a lot. Usually, when I'm working my shift and the other person's, that means you don't get any days off because we're on opposite shifts. That was when we were on 12-hour shifts. But if it was the three shifts, eight-hour shifts, then I would work half of their shift and someone else would work the other half. So we would work 12 hours a day. Plus, I was required and it was recommended to me to be there at least an hour early to get ready for my shift to start and usually I was an hour late over at the end or two hours depending on whether or not there was a meeting. So I would possibly have 14 hours a day to get in a 12-hour shift.

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INTERVIEWER:

Did you move up? Did you get raises, promotions during that 19-year period?

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LILLY LEDBETTER:

I did. I was hired with Goodyear February 5th, 1979, and the squadron and group that I was in, that's their training program, that I was hired with. There were two women, one woman promoted out of the union, and three men. And one of the men was hired from off the street and the other two came from within Goodyears walls where they had decided to move up into management. And we five were on an extensive training program for about nine months. And part of that training, we had to learn everybody from Mahogany Row in Akron, Ohio, all the way down. And then we had to learn



each division in Gadsden. And when I hired in, there were around 5,000 employees, five divisions, plus some support areas. There were a lot of people. And after those training months, early training months then we moved into physically working the jobs in the division that we would be assigned.

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LILLY LEDBETTER:

So I did get the radio division and that's where I wanted because there was the tube plant, truck and tractor, the passenger tire, mill room, and I certainly didn't want the mill room at the time because you usually came out covered in lamp black. But that was beside the point. I wanted in that radio division simply because of the new technology of building radial tires because I already had radial tires on my car, I knew coming from a mechanic that that was the best tire on the road for safety and ride and the quality and I knew that that that the way of the future and I know that those old passenger tires would be deleted from the production some day and I wanted to be a part of that new beginning of the radio tire division in Gadsden, Alabama. And that's where I was assigned. So I physically worked all of the jobs that I possibly could for three months in the radio division. So I would understand what it was like to be one of the union workers.

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INTERVIEWER:

So what was...your initial position, and then what was your position at the end of your time there.

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LILLY LEDBETTER:

I was hired as a supervisor in the production area, being the first line manager of an area. And when I first hired in, it was not unusual to have just a few people working for you and to have a department foreman above you to tell you how to schedule vacation and how to do this and how to that and to call and make a lot of the decisions. But Goodyear along the way decided they could do without that department foreman and move that level out and then they sent all of us to school for more training, more techniques, especially on managing the Kraus people, the engineering people and they did away with the engineering managers as well and then there would be one on each shift that would take over managing the engineer Kraus' people. I had to go to engineering school, pipe finning, mill rot, electric.

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LILLY LEDBETTER:

And I was the top, next to the top scorer after all of those classes were administered and the testing finished. There was a man who finished first, and then I was number two. The company congratulated me because they didn't expect that. But out of 150 managers, I came out at the very top. And then on my shift—



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INTERVIEWER:

Why didn't they expect that?

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LILLY LEDBETTER:

I was a woman. They didn't expect me to do that well because I was a woman. The managers that I worked for through the years would flat out tell me that Goodyear did not need women on the factory floor because we caused trouble. But we started out with the title of being a troublemaker, whether we were or not.

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INTERVIEWER:

What kind of trouble were you accused as a woman of causing?

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LILLY LEDBETTER:

Well, I never found out really. I took a lot of sexual harassment and there were a lot of times that it really got to be really a bad situation. But I continued to believe that if I persevered, I made a good example and there was only one other woman at the time when I went into the radio division as a supervisor, I felt like if she and I were successful that we would be opening the door and being trailblazers for women in the future. And later on I had a female electrician that came in and she was one of the best people that I ever had

worked for me while I was there at Goodyear. She later left and went with another tire company but she was very, very good at her job.

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INTERVIEWER:

Did you find in that environment that you supported each other or was there a competition among women?

00:34:32:00

LILLY LEDBETTER:

There were so few of us, even tire builders. When I first went on my third shift assignment, the responsibility of a department, I didn't even have any women working for me at the time. I only had men. Men was all I ever saw. In fact, people would ask me outside the plant what I did at Goodyear, and I jokingly say I chased men, which basically it was all male people that was on my shift at night. Later on, I did get some young females that would transfer out of the old side of the plant or new hires. And some of the older women who did transfer in from other jobs, I learned a lot of history from them about how hard it had been through the years to survive. But it was a good job. And the management job was an excellent job for a woman. It was hard. It was dirty. But it still a good manager's job. I put it up like being a manager of a baseball team.

00:35:32:00

LILLY LEDBETTER:

You have your players, you get your training, you get your equipment and your uniforms and your schedule and you go out to win. If you happen to lose the game that night on that shift, you come back the next night and find out what you did wrong and do better. And one of the pieces of advice that was given to me early on, never make a mistake working for Goodyear that I couldn't correct or eat because you just didn't waste any materials because they were so costly that the tires are made of costly materials and chemicals and rubber and you just cannot afford to mess up any of the supplies. And so that was really good advice. And you also can use all your senses because oftentimes a mistake would be prevented from just the smell that would be around where the work was going on.

00:36:34:00

INTERVIEWER:

You mentioned that there was sexual harassment all the time. Was that just something that women accepted as part of the job, part of the environment, that's just stuff you had to put up with to stay in this job?

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LILLY LEDBETTER:

Well, I basically knew that early on, being a new hire and a new worker and them already telling me they didn't want women on the factory floor, that you couldn't start hollering discrimination or file charges. That's not anything



that any of us want to do because being a company person, I was true blue to the company. I wanted to do everything possible in order to make everything be better for the company because I felt like if I saved them money that it would in turn come back to the people who worked for them. And so I always wanted to try to get along and try to work things out and make an example for future generations as well as myself. Only one time did it really get to the point that I had to do something about it. I just couldn't tolerate it anymore.

00:37:42:00

LILLY LEDBETTER:

But I did, and I will say that I put up with a lot through those years that would have been big suits early on because it was just intolerable. The people had gotten by for so many years and just — and not had the proper training, what they could and could not do, and they had got accustomed to being in that mode, and it was hard to get them out of it.

00:38:08:00

INTERVIEWER:

What was that one thing that pushed you over the edge?

00:38:11:00

LILLY LEDBETTER:

Well, when the person that I was working for just continually talked to me about one in the morning, he'd say, well, you didn't wear your bra to work today or you're going to be my next woman because everybody in the plant



says, you and I will be hooked up. And I said, no, I have a husband. I have home. I'm here to do my job. I have two children in college. I want to pay college tuition, that's all I want. But he continued to harass me day in and day out and try to get me hemmed up in situations and get his hands in certain places that I just couldn't tolerate it anymore. And when he looked me in the eye and he said, if you don't go to bed with me, come next week, you won't have a job. I saw college tuition bills flying in and the mortgage payment flying in. And knowing I needed my check and I needed to work. But I went to the HR manager and I said, I need some help.

00:39:15:00

LILLY LEDBETTER:

I need my old job back. They had moved me out of my manager's job and put me into running some tire trials with this man, this individual. And it was just he and I and one other person. And it very difficult to work with him and hear that all day long and to get any work done. And that's all he ever wanted to talk about. So the HR manager, he said, well, we'll send you home. We'll do an investigation. I said, is he going home? Oh, no, he's not going home. He'll stay. I said if he stays, I stay. He said, don't worry about it. We'll pay you. I said that's not the point. I want the same treatment. So they babysat me, basically, while they did their investigation. And I didn't like the way it was going because people started — they wouldn't back me up because the company had basically put out the word, I know that if the people didn't support their cause, they wouldn't have a job.

00:40:18:00

LILLY LEDBETTER:

So it was not security for people to support my story, my case. So I called the Equal Employment in Birmingham, Alabama on the phone. It was a pay phone at the time. Calls were a quarter. That dates me way back in the early 80s. But I said, I've got to file a charge, or I won't have a job. The guy said on the phone, he said, lady, we don't do that on the phone. And I said well, I need you to file this. I'll get there as quick as I can, but I can't get there before I know they're going to fire me. And so he filed the charge and put it on record. And there was a hearing at the Equal Employment Commission Office in Birmingham in the early 80s. And I won the right to sue because the lawyer with the EEOC at the time in the investigation, he found many discrepancies where Goodyear had not been truthful in what they were saying.

00:41:18:00

INTERVIEWER:

And what was the reaction over at Goodyear when this was decided?

00:41:24:00

LILLY LEDBETTER:

Well, when the Equal Employment Commission gave me the right to sue letter, I had a certain number of days to make my decision. I had no reason to sue. All I wanted was my job. I just needed my job and the opportunity to prove my ability and my capabilities and to prove to that company that I was a good manager, and that's all I wanted. So they asked me, what would it take



to satisfy me? And I asked for my supervisor's job back and I got it. Their attitude was that they didn't like the government telling them what to do, but they did give me my job, put me back in it, and I put my head down. I worked hard. I never offered any complaint. I persevered. If I had a question or a problem, I had the answer when I was approached about it, And I excelled. And then in the early 90s, when they started up the light truck radio division in Gadsden, they handpicked four managers to start that up, because at that time they had—

00:42:34:00

INTERVIEWER:

And did that include you?

00:42:35:00

LILLY LEDBETTER:

That included me. I was one of those four people to be handpicked by a group of top managers in the plant to start the light-truck radio division. And that was quite an honor. And I got picked as one of those. Was congratulated from people: my former bosses, who them and myself had had some conflict along the years, but they congratulated me, told me I had earned it and earned the recognition and the respect. And then in '95 or '96, I was given the top performance award based on my record that year.

00:43:12:00

INTERVIEWER:

Tell me about that award. What was that based on?

00:43:14:00

LILLY LEDBETTER:

That was based on the performance of my people. We had adhered to the schedule that was put out. In other words, we ran the schedule, even though a lot of times it required tire changes, but we ran schedule, low scrap, good quality product, low absenteeism, no accidents, and just a good all-around safety record, and it was really, overall, one of the best years I ever had. But to be there and to be a part of that ground procedure of having the machines put in and implementing the program and starting up was quite an honor and a great opportunity for me.

00:43:57:00

INTERVIEWER:

So, all that time, it sounds like you had recovered or felt like you'd recovered from what could have potentially been the end of your job there, and you had a great comeback.

00:44:09:00

LILLY LEDBETTER:

Right.

00:44:10:00

INTERVIEWER:

And things seemed to be—how were you feeling about the company at that point, and how were you feeling about their treatment of you? Did you ever suspect that anything else could be wrong?

00:44:21:00

LILLY LEDBETTER:

Well, I felt really good about it because the starting up the light truck radio did not get any of us, to my knowledge, any additional monies at the time. But when we changed from being supervisors going into area managers, that's when my pay really didn't match up to what the men were getting. And then, too, for the first two years of my employment with Goodyear, they gave cost of living raises. Everybody got the same amount. And then they went to the pay for performance, where they were to review us. But all through all of those 19 years and 10 months, I did not get reviewed each year. Most of the time, when they first started the reviews and analyzing us periodically, was when they were having a salary cutback, in other words, a layoff.

00:45:15:00

LILLY LEDBETTER:

They had one in 1985, another one in 1986. I didn't get cut in '85, but in 1986, I did. And then I was out for 12 months, I believe, and I was hired back. But my seniority went on. My seniority and my benefits, everything continued to build. If you go back to that time in less than 15 months, it



would continue to grow. So I went back to Goodyear, and I had hired in with Tyson Foods during that time, and had trained to be a plant superintendent for them. And went back to Goodyear, then in 1987, and finished up my career. And then I got cut again later on, but I was only out about three days when I got called back.

00:46:02:00

INTERVIEWER:

So, take me back to that moment in 1998 when you made a discovery.

00:46:11:00

LILLY LEDBETTER:

I went in to work, as I always did, an hour to an hour and a half early to get my mail, to check my email, and my mail was in a little cubby hole, a little slot, and where people would give you certain information posted around. You might have a medical review, you know, from the company insurance office, or you could have instructions about the evening shift, or just numerous mail. So I always checked that and I checked my email on the computer and then I would check the end of day night book where they would write mechanical problems and equipment repair history and if there had been a major occurrence during the previous shift. So I would have all of the information that I would need. I pulled out the mail first because that was always the quickest and the simplest.

00:47:05:00



LILLY LEDBETTER:

I looked at the mail and immediately fell out of three—a rough torn piece of paper about a quarter of a sheet of eight and a half by eleven paper, of four first names: Lilly and three men and when I looked and saw how much those men were making, base pay only just base pay, knowing how much overtime I had worked my first initial thought was how—was devastation, humiliation...I felt like I had fallen somewhere and people were looking, I was embarrassed. I just felt so degraded. I don't think I've ever had a lower point.

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INTERVIEWER:

But do you remember exactly what that note said?

00:47:50:00

LILLY LEDBETTER:

It was just four names. It was four first names and our base pay and people have asked me: "how did I know it was right?" Because mine was and it was an unusual to the dollar amount, \$3,727. That was an unusual amount. I knew mine was right, so I didn't have any reason not to believe the other three were right. And it was just our four first names. And we each had the same job, just a different shift, just a different shift. It was nothing different except we worked a different shift: two worked night shift and two worked day shift. And what we learned, it's discovery, too, that the other women that had worked, they were underpaid as well. Oftentimes, I was paid below the minimum for my job, and that really hurt through those years.

00:48:45:00

INTERVIEWER:

Do you remember the other numbers? Do you remember what's the, what was the—

00:48:49:00

LILLY LEDBETTER:

One was over 5,000. One was around 5,200, and then there was one that was 48, almost 5,000. They were all three above 48 hundred dollars. And two of them was over five thousand. So it was a lot of money difference and we—our monthly pay was based on a hundred and seventy three hours and if you divided a hundred seventy three into either one of those pays and then calculated time and half or double time or triple time it made a tremendous difference.

00:49:28:00

INTERVIEWER:

In the end.

00:49:29:00

LILLY LEDBETTER:

Yes, yes. And then the retirements. It was a tremendous difference in retirement, especially the 401k and the contributory.

00:49:40:00

INTERVIEWER:

Because it was all based on that.

00:49:42:00

LILLY LEDBETTER:

What you earned, right? What you were paid. Immediately, my mind started calculating overtime, because overtime was a big motivator. Because I had children in college. We had a mortgage to pay. We had car payments. We had the usual expense that families have. And it was so hard to make ends meet sometimes like people today. And it's no different really today as compared to then. But I was just so devastated just to think that I had worked so hard. There had never been a job too dirty, too hard, too hot, too far up on the top of the building, down under, pushing out boxcars. When I was in the tube plant, I had to push a boxcar out each day to change the lamp black when it ran out. Me and the general operator, and it turned out I had a female operator, so it was okay. We could do it. There was no problem.

00:50:48:00

LILLY LEDBETTER:

But then to stand there and look at those numbers and just think back how hard it'd been on my family when it was totally unnecessary. And I did not see how I could muster up enough dignity to get through a 12-hour shift, not knowing who gave me the note, not knowing where the information came from, and wondering how many people in that factory and on that floor that



night would know about that. How many people would know? You know, it was just devastating to have that information, and what would I do with it? I finally walked around a while and went into the ladies' lounge and tried to talk to myself and get my courage up knowing I had to get through the shift, I really wanted to take my bag and go home. I really just wanted to run away and hide. But I couldn't do that. I couldn't and I had to stay and face it. I had to deal with it. So I put the note in my pocket and I continued on my shift and about halfway through the night, it hit me.

00:51:56:00

LILLY LEDBETTER:

My retirement is based on what I'm earning. My 401k was 10% matched by 6% stock. And my contributory pension that I had had from the time I hired in until then, it was also a percentage matched by a percentage from Goodyear. And all of those monies was shortchanged because of what I had been paid with my peers. And the Social Security today is also not—it's based on what I was earning. So all of my retirements, all of my savings, everything that I had tried to do for the future was shortchanged, much less having had to struggle all those years when it was totally unnecessary. It was—I had earned it. I was legally entitled to have been compensated better based on equal pay law that was signed into law in 1963 by John F. Kennedy. And then President Johnson signed Title VII in 1964 because Kennedy had been killed, or he would have signed it.

00:53:07:00

LILLY LEDBETTER:

But it was right for them to treat me more fairly than I had been treated. I didn't expect to make exactly what the men had paid, but I expected to be within a reasonable amount and 40 percent less. For the same job was not reasonable and my lawyer and I discovered when we were working on the case that for many, many years I was paid below the minimum for the job that I was doing. Now Goodyear tried to say they wished I had come to them first, I did and the response I got when I asked how I was being paid compared with my peers and how I was ranked. I felt that I was being shortchanged. My boss told me I was listening to too much BS.

00:54:03:00

LILLY LEDBETTER:

And when I was trying to find out from time to time how I stood, they would tell me that they didn't know, but they'd find out and get back with me. And often through the years, I would ask, what is the rate on this job now? Because I knew when cost of living increased the pay, the union people got jobs, then I knew that the company probably were increasing our rates as well, and they were. But I could never get an answer. They never would tell me. So when I got that note and I got home the next morning, I explained to my husband what I had learned and how devastated I was. And I said, unless you object, I want to file a charge with the Equal Employment Commission in Birmingham, Alabama. And he said, what time do you want to leave? Because

I explained to him initially that if I started it, I would be in it for the long haul.
I wouldn't be a quitter.

00:55:01:00

LILLY LEDBETTER:

I wouldn't give up. That I would there to face up to it and to prove what I should have been, how I should've been treated. I could not accept it. I couldn't accept it then. I still don't accept today, simply because the law was on my side. What I had done was exactly and legally correct, and I had earned more than I had been paid. And it's not right. It shortchanged my family then, and I'm shortchained today. I will be a second-class citizen as far as my income for the rest of my life, and there's nothing I can do about it.

00:55:43:00

INTERVIEWER:

So, your husband drove you to the Equal Opportunity Office.

00:55:45:00

LILLY LEDBETTER:

He did.

00:55:48:00

INTERVIEWER:

What did you do—walk me through that?

00:55:51:00

LILLY LEDBETTER:

My husband drove me to Birmingham since I had worked all night. And he waited for hours outside while I was interviewed. And the interviewer I got was very patient because it was so embarrassing to me to have to go in and sound like a whiner, a complainer, and to say they don't treat me fair. That's about all I think I got out of my mouth. And then she had to start pulling it out of me because I didn't want to have to talk about it. I really hated to have to say those words, but I did. And today I still go back from time to time and think of that person, she's still with the government with the Equal Employment Commission in Birmingham, Alabama.

00:56:43:00

LILLY LEDBETTER:

And I encourage them to always be patient with people because it is so embarrassing and so humiliating to have to go to their office and complain when we shouldn't. It'd be so much simpler to be treated fairly. I didn't want anybody to give me anything except the opportunity, and then I would earn my way. But she interviewed me for over three hours, not taking a break, and got every gory detail that my attorney told her later was very helpful with the case and provided him with the materials he needed. The reason that the Equal Employment Office did not pursue my case, they were understaffed and backlogged at the time and they thought I could get to federal court faster with an attorney representing me. And I found John Goldfarb at the Wiggins Quinn.

00:57:40:00

INTERVIEWER:

This is your lawyer, this is your current lawyer, the lawyer that...

00:57:43:00

LILLY LEDBETTER:

Mr. John Goffard won my case in the federal court in Anniston, Alabama and uh, it was—

00:57:50:00

INTERVIEWER:

What was the reaction at Goodyear with management? I mean, you know, this is the second time they get a complaint regarding you, but what was their initial reaction about this specific complaint?

00:58:05:00

LILLY LEDBETTER:

By the time the Equal Employment had done their investigation and had given me the right to sue, I had taken an early retirement and had left because once I filed a charge, the Goodyear had made it so difficult. They had put me into a new job, which there was not a job description. There was not a PNP, a policy and procedure book on. There was not any information that I had to refer to to do the job, and I was dependent on other people, while other people would not talk to me because it was not good job security to be



seen talking or giving me any assistance whatsoever. And my mother was dying with cancer, and that was that only child again, and she was dependent on me because I lost my father in 1987.

00:59:03:00

LILLY LEDBETTER:

So...I sort of got hemmed into a corner and I didn't think to ask for advice. I made a decision on my own to take that early out. My attorney told me later when I got with him that that was the worst mistake I made. I should not have given up and I wouldn't have except I was so, I guess, lost, felt so lost and hemmed into a situation I had no control over. And it was just really devastating to do that.

00:59:36:00

INTERVIEWER:

Why was it a mistake?

00:59:38:00

LILLY LEDBETTER:

Well, he said I would have done better had I stayed. And actually, by leaving with 19 years and 10 months, it hurt my retirement. And I should have stayed because I didn't have enough money that I could live on. I cashed out just about all of my 401K in the first two years because I was only 60. And I did not draw social security at the time. So it was really, that was a problem and I should have stayed because I shouldn't have quit. But I didn't even think to

ask the Equal Employment people's advice. I made a decision. It was the wrong decision, but Good yYear was acting in such a way, I just, it was just impossible to perform my job responsibility, and I saw that the outcome didn't look good.

01:00:32:00

INTERVIEWER:

You may have quit your job, but you, you stuck with the case, and you fought it out.

01:00:38:00

LILLY LEDBETTER:

I stuck with that case because once I filed that charge, I intended to see it through. They called and made me an offer of \$10,000 if I would drop the suit, and they would send me a check for \$10. And I told the lady who called that I would accept \$60,000 because I did exactly what the judge did later. I knew that I was only entitled to two years back pay. And so I took the lowest-paid mail in the tire room where I worked and calculated my pay based on his, because the note was the start of my information. And later, after I filed the charge, I got in the mail anonymously the last evaluation sheet of the tire-room people. So that's how I knew what the lowest paid person was. So I took that with no overtime, no savings, no matching money. Anything, just the basics. Just the basics and calculated two years back pay.

01:01:41:00

LILLY LEDBETTER:

I called them back and said I would accept \$60,000 and I never heard from them. So we ended up in federal court in January of 2003. After a week, the jury came back with a verdict on Friday. We find in a plaintiff's favor \$3.8 million. But the judge had to go to the jury and to the courtroom. How I was only entitled to \$300,000. My three million dropped to \$300,000 immediately. And the foreman and the jury had told my attorney that they gave me that large award, trying to compensate me for all of that lost overtime pay that I had suffered through the years and done without and the future retirements that I would never get, because there's nothing in the law that allows an individual. To regain any of those lost overtime pay hours that you've lost or your future retirements.

01:02:42:00

LILLY LEDBETTER:

They never get adjusted. So that's why they tried to give me enough money to offset that. Although there is a cap and a woman only having the fact she is a woman and no race or any other detail involved, I was only entitled to \$300,000. So that \$3 million became \$300 thousand.

01:03:04:00

INTERVIEWER:

What was the cap based on?

01:03:06:00

LILLY LEDBETTER:

The fact that I only had the fact I was a woman, I only had one item. I didn't have race or anything else involved. So that cap was put on by Congress in 1991. And then on back pay, you can only get two years, two years. So the judge did the same thing that I had done. He took that lowest paid person in the tire room and gave me an award of 30,000 per year. So I left the courtroom with that verdict of actually being entitled to \$360,000. My law firm had been pro bono, which meant had I got that money, they would have gotten HIFE. And I would have had to pay taxes, federal and state—almost all of it because it was in lieu of wages. I would've had very little money as a net. For me though, it was never about the money. It was never about the money.

01:04:01:00

LILLY LEDBETTER:

From day one, when I got that note, after I got through that devastation and the heartache of having been treated that way, I threw my head back in my shoulders and I thought, this is not right. This is not right and it cannot stay without me standing up for myself. I started out by standing up for myself and then when that verdict came down from the Supreme Court, I knew I had to stand up for other people in this country.

01:04:31:00

INTERVIEWER:



Tell me about the Supreme Court. So first you had this victory, even though there was a cap on it. It was still your win. You beat Goodyear in that first federal court case.

01:04:43:00

LILLY LEDBETTER:

The headlines the next day even though I left the courtroom with a \$360,000 award, the headlines read around the country, Chicago, Washington D.C., everywhere the papers and the news media was putting out: "Jacksonville Alabama woman awarded \$3.8 million from Goodyear Tire and Rubber." I loved it. I loved it. I'll tell you, there's a lot of power in being able to see those papers, and I just couldn't get enough of the media then to see those headlines and to know that somebody agreed with Lilly Ledbetter, and the law had been on my side. And I had a great attorney with a great firm, and they supported my case. I had spent \$35,000 of my own money in gas and phone calls and printing costs and different things.

01:05:39:00

LILLY LEDBETTER:

Because my attorneys were 75 miles from where I live. And I've spent a lot of days working this case because I tried to call everybody I ever knew at Goodyear that I thought might testify on my behalf. And I finally had two wonderful women who testified on my behalf. One had finally sold 22 years of service, left the company and was working as a supervisor with Honda. And took a day's vacation to come to court and testify on my behalf. And the



other one was still working, and she went through hell and torment at work later for having testified on my behalf. But they stood up and they told their stories and it backed up my case. I had other people in the hall waiting, but after their two testimonies that we didn't need anyone else.

01:06:30:00

LILLY LEDBETTER:

And the fact that one of them— the one who'd sold her service—they asked her: why did she never complain? She said, I supported a handicapped son and we live paycheck to paycheck. I knew if I ever brought up my pay, I would not have a job. Cause Goodyear told us when we hired in, you never discuss your pay or you will not work here. So that's why the pay was so top secret. You couldn't find out anything from anybody. We never knew when each other got raises. We didn't know how much through the years when I got a raise, I didn't know if it was sufficient or not. I didn't know if that was good or not, most of them didn't seem like they would be, but some raises were—seemed—pretty good. But that's, you still don't know if it's based on discrimination or not.

01:07:23:00

INTERVIEWER:

When you...so nine years after you got that not, you fought your case, you won, and down the road, you took it all the way to the Supreme Court. And then what happened? What happened at the Supreme Court?

01:07:41:00

LILLY LEDBETTER:

Can I tell you about getting to the Supreme Court?

01:07:43:00

INTERVIEWER:

Tell me about getting to the Supreme Court.

01:07:45:00

LILLY LEDBETTER:

During those years of working on the case with the attorney in my family, life goes on and it's not always easy. During those years my husband had two major back surgeries, but he got over both of those and did really well. Then he developed cancer. The last years of his life, he had a cancer on the right ear, then one on the left ear, and then two months after that one he had on a big knot that came out through his jaw that was as hard as the floor and the doctor took a biopsy and long story short on that after the second surgery they had to remove the left side of his face and the grafted skin from his right leg. I went to the Supreme Court, left him at home with a home health care nurse. My daughter and I traveled to Washington and sat in the Supreme court to hear my case.

01:08:40:00

LILLY LEDBETTER:



I came and I got back home after the case was heard and we had 34 radiation and chemo treatments and he went down tremendously. Then he had a stroke in his left eye from the radiation being shot into the left side of his head. We had three operations on that, numerous trips to the hospital, and numerous other surgeries. He had prostate surgery and that was very complex. And then it was just...hospital and doctor, one right after the other. And to watch him go down was just horrible. But he supported me from that very first drive to Birmingham, and he knew, he knew that the bill would pass. He knew that the law would be changed back. I left him at home in December of 08 to come to New York and do the 2020 segment with Elizabeth Vargas. And when I got back to Alabama, I found him.

01:09:37:00

LILLY LEDBETTER:

He was cold. He died that morning with a massive stroke. The undertaker said that he had probably been dead by the time he hit the floor. I really felt bad that I was gone. But still, that's what he wanted me to do. He encouraged me to go because it had been rescheduled twice. And he said, if you go, then we'll have the holidays to look forward to. And you won't have to be looking to have to make another trail. So I went, but I did find him dead after that. But I did go to the Supreme Court, and we waited for many months until May of 2007 for the verdict. When the verdict came out, and I heard what Alito had written in the opinion, I just couldn't believe it.

01:10:25:00

LILLY LEDBETTER:

Because what he stated was that I should have filed my charge when I got the first discriminatory paycheck, even though I didn't know it, and even though I had no proof, even though I couldn't prove it, I should have filed a charge. And what that would mean today would mean that most people, when they get a job, their pay is initially set in their first paycheck. That means they've got the first six months of employment. I don't think so because most people are still on probation in some jobs. You don't want to think about filing a charge, you want to continue to do well, you want make a good impression and learn your job, you wouldn't do that, that didn't make sense. And that's not the way the law had always been interpreted. The precedent had been, it had been interpreted on a paycheck accrual rule, which meant if you were still getting paid, still getting a check, and you find out you're being discriminated against, like I did, you've got 180 days to file a charge.

01:11:34:00

LILLY LEDBETTER:

Which is reasonable. You've got time to check it out, you've got to time to follow up, you've time to find out if that's what you need to do. And if you've worked for a reasonable employer, they might have missed something, you could do other things, it's very reasonable. There have never been a lot of lawsuits, there have never a lot people who do them because one thing, it takes so many years and they're so timely and it really—and you put your name on that being a troublemaker list, so to speak, and it's not a good thing



to do. And most people who have jobs, that's not their goal in life, to file a lawsuit. And there's not any big payoffs in cases like this. But that's what he wrote.

01:12:20:00

LILLY LEDBETTER:

But Justice Ruth Bader Ginsburg came back with a dissent, and one of the reporters from Washington told me. If I could have only been in that courtroom, I would never look back at having lost that case to hear her dissent. She said, these people don't understand what it's like in the real world, and they don't. People don't stand around water coolers discussing their pay. They don't talk about them. Oftentimes, even if you knew someone was making a little more than you, it might not be based on discrimination. It might not be discriminatory. And you might not even know why. Maybe there's different reasons. She said, the ball is in Congress's court, and I challenge them, it's now up to them to do something about this great injustice. And they did. Immediately, Representative George Miller's committee called—

01:13:21:00

INTERVIEWER:

Was that like an a-ha moment for you, I mean, when you heard that dissent and Justice Ginsburg say it's up to Congress now to do something, what did you think? How did you interpret that? Did it hit you at that point that, oh, that's what we have to do, we've got to do it?

01:13:41:00

LILLY LEDBETTER:

Well, when I heard Justice Ginsburg challenge Congress to pick it up and to do that, initially I thought, you know, nobody is going to take this serious. I just really felt that, you know I had lost. In fact, the lawyers told me when they called to explain that we had been ruled against, that they would handle the media. I wouldn't have to deal with them if I didn't want to. But I thought about that, and I thought, I've given this my best. I've done all I can do. The law was on my side. I have nothing to be embarrassed about. I believe it's the Supreme Court that should be embarrassed. Those five justices who voted no, I think it's them.

01:14:27:00

LILLY LEDBETTER:

And that government lawyer that went in and sided with Goodyear's case and the Supreme court, they should be embarrassed. So when NBC called, I invited them into my home. CNN called, and I invited him in. Norman Lear's people from American Way, they called, and they came into my home and did video after video that runs on YouTube and still does today. And then when the law schools called and wanted videos for training in their law schools, I invited them in. I went on every TV program I did, every paper magazine interview. I've been featured in so many papers around the country. And for a long time, I tried to get copies of each one of them. I had people in key places

sending me media. Now I don't even try anymore. If I get it, that's great. If I don't, that's OK, too. But it was such an exciting time to be who I was.

01:15:28:00

LILLY LEDBETTER:

And the outpouring across this nation. It's like one of the articles said, I touched a nerve. I struck a nerve, and I really did. And the groups, the National Women's Law Center, the American Association of University Women, and all the other groups across the nation, even men's groups, they came out to support this cause. Because people today are smarter, the young men and the older men, they realize that in this America that we live in today, it takes most of the time two people in a family to keep the home fires burning in middle America. And that's what it's about. It's about our families, our livelihoods, our education for our children, and to get this country back on track. And that what it will take is equal pay for equal work.

01:16:24:00

INTERVIEWER:

What do you think it is about your story in particular that really resonated for Americans? I mean, after the Supreme Court decision and the follow-up, what do you think spoke to people about your experience in your story?

01:16:43:00

LILLY LEDBETTER:

They could relate to it. I've heard so many stories, so many stories, and I go today, I travel 10 months a year speaking and I share my story with anyone. I'll share it with one person, 10 or 1,200 or thousands. I will do it because it is so important. What I want on college campuses today is to let the young people know that their retirements and their livelihoods start when they go to work. And they need to negotiate their pay, they need to investigate their companies that they go to work for. And they make sure: don't accept anything through the years. Review, investigate, know that they're being compensated and treated fairly. And to the people who are working, they need to do the same thing. Because once you're into retirement and you've lost it, it's gone forever. There's nothing you can do about it. But the reason that, and I tell audiences today, it's not that I'm a special person, and it's that my story was special.

01:17:51:00

LILLY LEDBETTER:

It's simply because it touches every life of every person I meet, because somebody in their life has lived through the same thing or is living through it or needing help today, simply because they're not being compensated what they should. There's so many women who are held to much lower paying jobs. When they're supporting families, they're single mothers. I hear stories about women who work two full-time jobs through the week, and they'll work one day on the weekend. And they still have to rotate a bill out each

month because they can't make all their bills. And that hurts our education. It causes obesity in our younger children.

01:18:35:00

LILLY LEDBETTER:

When the mothers are working those type of hours to support their families, they can't go to school and check on grades or what their children are doing or check on homework. They're too tired. They don't cook good meals. They don't have balanced meals. The children are fending for themselves. That's caused the obesity problem. Our country is dropping behind and compared to other countries, we're about number three now. We're not number one anymore in education.

01:19:02:00

INTERVIEWER:

Tell me about...when you set out to change the law—I mean, when did it hit you that you could change the law? When did that become a possibility for you? When did it seem like a real, doable goal to have?

01:19:19:00

LILLY LEDBETTER:

Really, when the call came immediately from Congressman George Miller's office. They were going to start working on it. They wanted me to come to Washington. My attorney and I came back to Washington, and we went for a huge press conference. I really didn't know what to expect that day. I had

watched C-SPAN when people had testified before, but I never really paid a lot of attention to it.

01:19:45:00

INTERVIEWER:

Because you thought it was over at the Supreme Court.

01:19:47:00

LILLY LEDBETTER:

I really didn't know exactly where we would be going when we came to Washington, but they wanted to take up the fight and to change it back. And I was willing to be a part of that because it was so desperately needed. And there were so many judges clearing off their calendars throughout the nation based on that ruling, the 180-day technicality. So I came to Washington, my attorney and I did. We did, I did the press conference with... I've never seen so many microphones and cameras in my life, but then we went into that hearing and there said an attorney that the United States Chamber of Commerce had paid to come in and argue against Lilly Ledbetter. But every time he would nitpick my testimony or my depositions to take out a part of a sentence, I would ask permission from the chairman to clarify that and explain it.

01:20:45:00

LILLY LEDBETTER:

He once nitpicked where one of the former bosses I'd had said, if I would go to the local motel, that I could be rated number one. And he said, but that man is no longer living. I would imagine that it's a hardship on the company to get a statement. Well, I clarified the fact that that man lived another 10 years after that particular time. They could have gotten a charge at any time before he died. So, it was not, it wasn't easy, but I could not let them put in these discrepancies and make it seem like I had been a liar all the way through. Because I wouldn't have been there and I wouldn't have fought so hard if I didn't know the law was on my side. But after then, they made it sound that day that if we could change this law and put it back the way it was within that year, that it would make all of my case be retroactive.

01:21:43:00

LILLY LEDBETTER:

But my attorneys immediately upon break time explained to me that they'd never known this to happen in the past. It sounds good, and I told them, I said, that's okay: don't worry about it fellows, because I've never been in this for the money. I was in it for what was right. And it was not right to let this stand for the other people across this nation. So we fought and we started working on it and I felt really good that Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton, Senator Obama, Senator Ted Kennedy, and all of those people when it got to the Senate, was supporting the bill and working for it. Harry Reid and Senator Barbara Mikulski took up the fight later. Senator Dodd and all those people



were fighting and there were so many people and we had Republicans because you see this didn't matter whether you were Democrat or Republican. It meant civil rights. It meant a human right. It had nothing to do with either party. It was a bipartisan program: we needed both houses to come together and support the working people across this nation. And we got the Republicans.

01:22:55:00

INTERVIEWER:

I'm going to interrupt you because I want to hear about the day that it was signed into law. January 28th? 29th? crosstalk. January 29th, 2009.

01:23:07:00

LILLY LEDBETTER:

Well, my daughter's family, she and her husband and the three grandsons had traveled to Washington. And the day we left the hotel, arrived at the gate, and we were escorted in. But walking up to the gate I felt like a rock star. And my grandson's eyes are getting large. They're looking at me like, you know, what's happening here? And people are chanting my name. And oh it's because my daughter had been on the train trip in the inauguration trip with me. So she'd had a taste of what it was like to travel with me and so she had warned the boys and Bill that morning at breakfast how, you're going to see a different side of your grandmother today. Even hearing her speak, it's not like what we've known through the years. So we walk up and you know, the boys are looking at me and they're grinning and they were like kind of getting

embarrassed and then we see the Washington's attorney was there, the one who represented him in the Supreme Court.

01:24:06:00

LILLY LEDBETTER:

My Birmingham attorney had, his wife had made sure that he made the journey to be there at the White House for the bill signing. And so we finally get in the gate and get up to the Whitehouse and then walking down that red carpet with the president was an answer to some prayers because I had hoped and believe that maybe...that this bill would be the first one signed, and it would make a big, significant difference. And it would send that message back to those five justices in the Supreme Court. They got it wrong. They got it wrong. They overstepped their boundaries, I believe, in making that decision, because they basically had changed the law. And that's not their job. They're supposed to interpret the law. They're not there to make the law and to change it.

01:24:59:00

LILLY LEDBETTER:

And, but they did and so I liked the fact that it sent that message back and that put me in the history books I was so humbled and I never will I don't think ever be anything but humbled by that day the significance of that pen because I didn't get any money I did not get what I had rightfully earned and I was very disappointed for my family for all those years But in the meantime, it had given me a greater reward, much richer reward, because I feel like that

my young granddaughter and the women that my grandsons will someday marry, that they will have a better opportunity because of having that bill signed and to change the law back to where it was.

01:25:50:00

INTERVIEWER:

A law named after you.

01:25:52:00

LILLY LEDBETTER:

The law named me, and I have learned since then that that's quite uncommon. And it's not a common thing to have a bill or a law named for an individual and it's like Congressman Miller said and two, usually when they are named for an individual, it's one of the lawmakers who have proposed the bill or started it or been the big instigator to get it to be successful.

01:26:21:00

INTERVIEWER:

Tell me the name of the law and what you think the legacy is for future generations.

01:26:32:00

LILLY LEDBETTER:

The name of the bill is the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act and basically the law was put back exactly where it was prior to the ruling in my case. It was



important early on. I learned from all the lawmakers that it was important to put it back exactly like it was primarily because we didn't want anything added, no amendments or none of those ridiculous things that had. Cropped up that people had proposed, but very simply, the way it had been interpreted and the way had been in the years past. Because there had never been a lot of lawsuits. Most people who have been mistreated in their pay, they don't choose to do what I did because it is hard on the individual, it's hard on their families. And it separates you from people when you take a big stand.

01:27:27:00

LILLY LEDBETTER:

But in the meantime, I gained so many more friends and family because of this bill. The AAUW of people across the nation, the National Women's Law Center here in Washington, and other women's groups around the nation. Union groups and a lot of the men's groups understand how important this is for families.

01:27:51:00

INTERVIEWER:

What did you think of the women's movement back when you were working at Goodyear or when you were working at H&R Block, when you were a younger woman, what did you think of the women's movement?

01:28:03:00

LILLY LEDBETTER:

I was glad that there was a women's movement. I knew about the N.O.W. Group, I knew about those, I know about feminists. But I never really—I was so busy, caught up in daily life and daily responsibility of raising my family and the children playing football or being in the band and doing homework and trips and trying to make ends meet and pay bills. And to try to be planning how we were getting them into college and paying those bills and what was needed at home and meeting my employer's requirements wherever I was working until I never really got involved in those outside activities. I did some volunteer work at my church. I did volunteer work with scout groups and the band and the football team backing. But, I never got caught up in getting involved with them, but that's why I talk to young people today in women's groups who are working.

01:29:09:00

LILLY LEDBETTER:

They need to be sure that they know exactly where they stand. They cannot let that happen. You give up just a little while, but now people have computers doing research. You can sit down at your computer at home and do it online. You can do a lot of information, and then you can—we want new laws and new bills passed that will allow people at work to discuss their pay without retaliation.

01:29:37:00

INTERVIEWER:

Right. That's the next thing.

01:29:38:00

LILLY LEDBETTER:

That's next thing

01:29:41:00

INTERVIEWER:

Did you, even though you were busy, I know that you had a job, you had the family, you had all the after-school activities, did you consider yourself a feminist?

01:29:52:00

LILLY LEDBETTER:

I probably would have, I probably thought of myself as a feminist, but I never joined a group. I never participated in activities. But I really liked the publicity, the articles, and I read a lot, all through my years. I read five newspapers a day. I read business magazines, and did a lot of reading, and stayed current on laws and what was going on in the world around me. But to get involved, I did not. I did not actively get involved.

01:30:27:00

INTERVIEWER:

And what did that word mean to you? Like, what was it that made you consider yourself a feminist? Was there a moment that you said, oh, you know, I'm actually, I'm a feminist.

01:30:39:00

LILLY LEDBETTER:

To me a feminist meant that we were treated fair, that we were standing up for ourselves, that were pursuing better opportunities in life, whether it be in our jobs or our home lives or wherever we were exceeding what had been done in the past generations and that we were growing in who we are and the capabilities and what we have to offer.

01:31:06:00

INTERVIEWER:

What do you think is the biggest change for women since when you were younger?

01:31:12:00

LILLY LEDBETTER:

The biggest change is they have more opportunity, the education, possibilities. There's not any reason today a person shouldn't have a college degree. I like to refer to the Obamas as a classic example. They both got the highest education possible in their decided career. They went into the best



schools. They had a lot of debt when they came out, and I heard her tell audiences that they would be paying those debts for the rest of their life had Barack not wrote those two books. And those two book, the first two he wrote, paid off their student loans. And they really had never lived in a home of their own until they bought one together. They had always grown up in apartments. And that was, to me, that's a true American dream. That's what this country was built on, and that's what we need to get back to, where an individual can start with nothing and with a proper training and education. They can really pursue their dreams and ambitions and be compensated and paid for them and be a productive person to give back to the community, the state, and the nation.

01:32:27:00

INTERVIEWER:

Let me ask you about Roe v. Wade. How did that decision make you feel?

01:32:31:00

LILLY LEDBETTER:

Roe vs. Wade when that was passed, that was a big help in this nation. And today, we have too many people hung up on fighting abortions and talking about pro-life. We're not talking about Pro-Life here. We're talking about Pro-Choice. And it's not the, you know, a factory. Because I came up during the time when young women who really needed an abortion to save their lives, they couldn't get them. They had to go into Mexico or they did them with the back alley non-medical groups to do them and oftentimes they lost

their life. They were trying to save their life but they would lose it because they had no legal way to get a legal abortion. And that's what the purpose of Roe vs. Wade was for. And I believe today that if a person needs that abortion to save their life, it should be done in a clean medical facility.

01:33:35:00

LILLY LEDBETTER:

I wasn't up on everything, but I knew the horror stories I had heard, and then when that law was passed, it was corrected. It just went a little too far with the businesses that that's all they did. And it's not to be used for birth control, definitely not. But it should be, to save a person's life, they should be entitled to being able to go into a good medical facility with a good physician. And have that abortion when it's needed. And that decision is based on that person and their family.

01:34:10:00

INTERVIEWER:

There are people who say that—you just said that sometimes it's gone too far, with businesses fully dedicated to it. But do you think that the women's movement has gone too far in some instances?

01:34:25:00

LILLY LEDBETTER:

No, I don't think the women's movement has gone far enough and especially the...women are still so far behind because the Title VII and equal pay has



been around for 48 years, almost a half a century. And we still, we started out when it was passed, the women were making \$0.59 an hour that's white women. And today, we only make 77 cents compared to the male's dollar. We're still way behind. We have not made near the progress that we should. And that not only affects their pay, but it goes on into retirement and our benefits. And today the top property level is made up of women. And it's women like myself who we outlive our spouses by ten years. And my income dropped at my household the day my husband died, more than 10 percent.

01:35:30:00

LILLY LEDBETTER:

But I've never been so proud, going back to the women's movement, as when Geraldine Ferraro was nominated for the vice presidency of the United States. And then when Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton started running for the presidency of United States, she is one of the smartest women, she is the smartest woman I have ever met. In my life. She is a caring person and she is tough. The people have a lot of respect for her when I traveled to Rome, Italy to share my story with the Italian ministries. The people over there was continually talking about Secretary of State Hillary Clinton.

01:36:13:00

INTERVIEWER:

Are you hoping for a female president?

01:36:16:00

LILLY LEDBETTER:

I am. I would like to see she would have been the best qualified person ever running because she had been to the White House for eight years with Bill. When he was President, she lived through those years. She and President Clinton, they both, when they were in college, dedicated themselves to being public servants for the rest of their lives in the political era.

01:36:43:00

INTERVIEWER:

What's the most meaningful, useful piece of advice you've ever received?

01:36:49:00

LILLY LEDBETTER:

To always be true to myself and be honest in everything I did.

01:36:57:00

INTERVIEWER:

What's the best piece of advice that you would give to a young woman today?

01:37:00:00

LILLY LEDBETTER:

I tell people today that to know who you are, know what your strengths and your weaknesses are and to research prospective employers and to know and to set your goals on who you want to be in life and what you want to

accomplish and go after those goals but you to stay true to yourself and pursue those education abilities and to benefit yourself and that will benefit you, your community and the nation and we'll be stronger for it.

01:37:36:00

INTERVIEWER:

What did you want to be when you grew up, as a kid? What did you dream of being?

01:37:41:00

LILLY LEDBETTER:

I really wanted to be an engineer, because I learned in school very early that my top strength and subject was math, and so therefore I wanted to be in some area of engineering.

01:37:57:00

INTERVIEWER:

What's the accomplishment you're most proud of?

01:38:01:00

LILLY LEDBETTER:

Probably having a bill named for me, and I never started out in life with an ambition to have a case go all the way to the Supreme Court and to have a law named for me, but today it is such an honor to have that bill named for me.



01:38:21:00

INTERVIEWER:

What was your very first paying job?

01:38:24:00

LILLY LEDBETTER:

I was working for General Electric as a union worker on a production line.

01:38:30:00

INTERVIEWER:

What person that you've never met has had the biggest influence on your life?

01:38:35:00

LILLY LEDBETTER:

Oprah Winfrey. For a long time, it was Mrs. Roosevelt, but then I started watching Oprah Winfrey early on and I really got caught up with who she was, how far she has come in her life and what she has accomplished. That's a prime example for young women today to see where she came from, her background, and how doors opened for her and how she made things happen and what she's given back to people. She's a great influence on a lot of people, I believe, today. I really wanted, through the years working on the Lilly Ledbetter Fair Pay Act, I wanted so very much to get on her show because I thought five minutes on her shows with her viewing audience, there would be so much pressure in Washington, D.C. that all of those Republicans and the Democrats would come together and vote and support our families' needs.

01:39:43:00

INTERVIEWER:

Do you think that young women today realize what your struggle is?

01:39:48:00

LILLY LEDBETTER:

No, they don't. Most of them don't, in fact, I'll give you a quick example. I was up at a college in upstate New York early this year, and when I spoke to that college group, and most of the students there was—I'd say 65% of them was male and the other was female. And when I opened it up for questions, the first young African American girl said that last summer they all went out and got jobs at Home Depot. And the first thing they told all the young people was, they cannot discuss their pay or they wouldn't have a job. Well, they're summer, temporary people. What did these young people do? They talked about it. So she found out that the young white guy on the cash register next to her that was a temporary hire and herself, he was making \$9 an hour and she was making 8.50. Same job. Somebody in the room said, why didn't you quit? She said, because jobs were hard to find for the summer. I needed the money to come back to school in the fall.

01:40:48:00

LILLY LEDBETTER:

And it was very important for me to work. And I couldn't, it was too late in the summer. I couldn't get another job. I don't even know if I would've found



one making \$8.50 an hour. So she continued to do it. See, that's what has held women back. Just like Cathy who worked at Goodyear, she couldn't afford to even mention her pay because she might lose her job. You can't afford lose your job. And that's why people are locked into this. It's like the young woman I talked to in the airport.

01:41:18:00

LILLY LEDBETTER:

It's like being held hostage.

01:41:20:00

LILLY LEDBETTER:

They're held hostage, and we're not advancing. That's why we're still so far behind. And until we get the young men in the room to support us, and their perception is like the picture, change, and it is changing. Then the young man who spoke after that young lady and that same group of class students, he said, I want to share something with this group. My mother has worked for a telephone company for 20 years. She's a telephone installer. She's faster, more accurate than any of the men, and makes 20% less than they do, and got more service time than most of them. Now, why do they pay her less than the pay the men? And she's asked about it, because they get by with it, and they know she won't quit.

01:42:05:00

LILLY LEDBETTER:



That's why we're held back. And it's a terrible, terrible situation. It really is. And it hurts our families. And on the military basis this past year, so many of the military men told me that they'd moved their mother in their homes. Now that I think about it, they're raising small children or teenagers, and they have school functions and family activities, and they still have their mother in their home which interferes with her schedule, and she doesn't want to be there. She wants to be self-sufficient and independent, and then they have, and it's an extra expense. Some people have had to build rooms to move their mothers in, or put mobile homes in their backyard. And this is not right.

END TC: 01:43:03:00