

Interviewee: Bonita Keefe-Layden  
Interviewer: Charlene L. Martin  
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**Abstract:** Bonnie Keefe-Layden describes her experiences the Army Reserves and as a CEO of the Sturbridge-based Rehabilitative Resources Inc. She attained the rank of Colonel during her 33-year military career and was deployed to Iraq in 2003 where she was the medical regulating officer of the 804<sup>th</sup> Hospital Command. While describing the responsibilities of the unit, she recalls the tragedies that she observed as well as proud moments striving to achieve transportation of injured personnel within “the golden hour” and first-time efforts evacuating injured to a ship, the U.S.N.S. Comfort. While proud of her military service, she is also proud of her work at the non-profit organization she led and her work with developmentally disadvantaged individuals. Bonnie also shares the difficulties of balancing life as a wife, mother, full-time worker, full-time student, and Army Reservist as well as the experience of being a woman in the military. She also struggled with cancer at one time in her life. She attributes the support she received from family, her ability to remain focused on the job at hand, and the leadership skills she developed as a CEO and as a Colonel, as contributing to her ability to successfully manage both careers and a family.

CM: I’m here with you today on June 8<sup>th</sup> and do I have permission to record you today?

BL: Yes, you do.

CM: Thank you. What is your full name including maiden name and married name?

BL: My full name is Bonita, maiden name Collette, Keefe, from my first marriage, hyphen Layden.

CM: When and where were you born?

BL: I was born in Malone, New York, September 13, 1949.

CM: And what’s the name of your husband?

BL: Kevin Layden.

CM: And do you have children?

BL: I do. I have three daughters.

CM: What are their names?

BL: The oldest daughter is Catherine Rockefeller. She lives in Germantown, New York. My next daughter is Ann Marie Billiot. She lives in Panama City Beach, Florida. And then Danielle Layden who currently resides in Leicester, MA.

CM: Any grandchildren?

BL: I do, I have two,—three, just had a third grandson. Mitchell Robideau who lives in Hyde Park, New York, and Ben and Noah Billiot who live in Panama City Beach. Ben is six and Noah is just coming on three months.

CM: What ethnicities or cultures do you identify with in your family background?

BL: Kind of a hodgepodge. My father's side of the family is a lot of French-Canadian and my mother's side a lot of English, and both sides of my family have American Indian. Native American Indian Mohawk.

CM: Tell me a little bit about your parents.

BL: Well, my parents are both from very large upstate New York families. My father is one of ten surviving children and he was second or third from the youngest. And my mom is the oldest of eleven children. So they came from very large families. So then [laughs] my parents had eleven children [of which she is the oldest]. My father worked for Alcoa in northern New York and that business kept laying off so then he became a custodian for the local regional school. Upstate New York is very rural. It's right in the St. Lawrence Valley. And my mom worked all of her life in a shoe factory—all my life in a shoe factory. And then in their later life, when they sort of retired from their professions, they ran a small family grocery store.

CM: Big family.

BL: Big family.

CM: Where have you lived during your life?

BL: Well, I grew up in Bombay, New York, and I've lived in that area—Fort Covington is the nearby town—during my first marriage. Then I moved to Webster [Massachusetts] when I was recruited to run a residential program for people with disabilities. So I lived in Webster and then I became the CEO [Chief Executive Officer at Rehabilitation Services, Inc.] and I met Kevin and we bought our house in Leicester and lived there since 1982.

CM: So pretty much your kids grew up in that area.

BL: Yes.

CM: Tell me a little bit about your school background, where you went to school.

BL: Well, I went to elementary, junior and senior high is all regional in New York, Salmon River Central School District. In fact, we're about to have our fiftieth reunion in August. And then I went to Canton College and I got an associate's degree. Then I went into human services and decided to get a degree and went to Plattsburgh State and when I got the job in Massachusetts I transferred to Worcester State and finished my degree there. Then I went on for my MBA [Master of Business Administration] at Clark [University].

CM: And that was in Human Services?

BL: My bachelor's from Worcester State was in Psychology and my associate's degree was in Hotel and Food Service Management. I was scheduled to go into a liberal arts program, but it hadn't been totally accredited. Canton College was an expansion thing and it hadn't got accredited so I chose the Hotel and Food Service Management because at that time in my life I was in a human services agency running a training program for people in cafeteria management.

CM: Interesting.

BL: Life takes you on different paths. You don't know. I got a job in a human service agency.

CM: So when you went from there to Worcester State you got your bachelor's?

BL: Yes and that was Psychology.

CM: And then you got—what was the degree at Clark again?

BL: A Master of Business Administration because by that time I had just become the CEO and felt that I had a pretty—I wouldn't say I could become a CPA [Certified Public Accountant], but I had a pretty strong background in finance. I wanted a broader business management degree so I went for the MBA.

CM: What year did you graduate from Clark?

BL: 1992 I believe.

CM: So that was while you were working.

BL: Yes and raising children.

CM: So when you were first getting your associate's degree, were you traditional college age at that time?

BL: Yes, right out of high school. I graduated at 18 and graduated with my associate's at 20 years old.

CM: So at that point in life, what did you see as your options?

BL: Well, I lived in upstate New York [laughs] so the options at that time in my life were to become a dietician because it's not a very commercial area at all. So a dietician was what I was thinking. I got married and 20 and had my daughter when I was 20 so I was a housewife with a husband committed to that regional part of the state. We did live in Syracuse for a short while. I worked for Syracuse University and thought maybe I would go on and get my degree from Syracuse University, but my husband wanted to move back home. So we moved back. So at that time my options in life were pretty much limited to nursing homes where I could become a dietician. So when I started at Plattsburgh State I started in a program for dietary because I had the Food Service Management degree. That's where my boss and [phone rings] his wife who were both in the Army Reserves unit recruited me. And that's how I got into the into the [Army] Reserves.

CM: So your boss recruited you?

BL: Yes.

CM: This is when you were still in New York?

BL: Yes, while I was still in New York. I had always been in New York and I was working for a rehabilitation center and I was at Plattsburgh State nights. So when I did join the Army Reserves I joined as a nutritional—because the unit—I've always been in the Medical Command—so the unit I was in needed dieticians and dietetic aides and they recruited me to fill a slot in the hospital unit. So strange how those things dovetailed [laughs].

CM: So how did he entice you to do this?

BL: It wasn't hard because my parents raised one of my cousins and he had gone in the Army and my uncle and one of my cousins served in Vietnam so it wasn't really hard to convince me. I was always kind of interested. I met a very interesting woman—a Navy recruiter—who came to my high school. And I had actually retained that and then went away to college and got married and had a child so I didn't go anywhere with that at the time. So the opportunity wasn't really hard. The extra income was pretty welcome [laughs] and the chance to serve my country was always a strong component. My father wasn't in the military because he had medical issues, but some of my uncles were on my dad's side and my mom's side so it was—and I was always, always, always a tomboy [laughs]. And I was always interested in war, gymnastics, and sports more than the average girl [laughs]. I was always that kind of kid.

CM: And what year was that when you first signed up?

BL: In the military? 1977—76. July '76.

CM: The bicentennial year. Very patriotic!

BL: Yes, yes. [laughs]

CM: So you've had a long career in the Reserves. How long?

BL: I retired in—I was forced to retire because when you turn 60, unless you're a doctor or become a general at 60 you retire. So that was 2009.

CM: That's a long time.

BL: And because I served more than 30 years I had no obligation. If you retire at 20 years, after six years you can be recalled, but I had 33 years—1976 to 2009.

CM: What rank did you obtain?

BL: Colonel.

CM: So tell me a little bit about the duties. What did you do?

BL: Well I started out enlisted. It's not rare, but it is unusual. Usually you stay in the enlisted ranks or the officer ranks, but with my associate's degree I became a Sergeant within a year because it gave me credit for my college degree. And so first I worked in the food service aspect of the hospital environment. Then, quite frankly, when you're a Reservist you're not actually—you have pretend patients. So that was quite boring for me so I was always volunteering to help with any other projects. I got involved more in the administrative aspect of the unit. I think I was 28 when I got in the Army Reserves so they had a cutoff for officer rank at 33 so I was working on my bachelor's degree and I could have got a direct commission, but I wanted to be a really good officer so one of the people in my unit had gone to the officer candidate school run by the Massachusetts Military Academy here and suggested that I might be interested in it. It was quite an application process and a thorough—it would be called a CORI [Criminal Offender Record Information] check now, but a security clearance and you cannot have a criminal record and become an officer, for example. So they do a very, very thorough search to make sure there's nothing in your background that would prevent you. I got accepted and it was only the fourth year that women had been accepted in the academy. I think there were only 11 females started in my class and about 125 candidates all together. It's very rigid, it's physical, it's mental, it's leadership, it's academic, and it was one weekend a month and two trainings on Camp Edwards on the Cape [Cape Cod]. It took about 15 months to do the whole program. It was hard to go. I had kids [laughs] and I was in college. It was like a puzzle that had to come together. But I did graduate. Only 38 people out of that 125 graduated and I think, interestingly

enough, proportionately we only had 11 women start but we had eight graduate. So proportionately a greater number of women graduated than men. Something I'm pretty proud of [laughs].

CM: You should be.

BL: It's not easy and it's not easy when you're a woman because in those days hazing—the whole thing is about hazing, but if you're a woman—and they did it—I was tiny and I was a Reservist and it was a National Guard school. I was the only Reservist that graduated. They put me into these leadership positions all the time to test you, literally. It was stressful emotionally, physically, so people literally got up in the middle of the night and left. By the droves. So it was quite an accomplishment and when you do get commissioned you have to pick your branch. I stayed with the Army medical branch and immediately my unit took me from a satellite here in Worcester and brought me to the headquarters. I got into what is called operations. Operations is the office of the military that does all the planning and coordination of everything you do so very challenging and always very interesting. I loved it [laughs]. I loved it. I got in originally with a six-year agreement and thought after six years I'd get out and then I thought I'd stay for ten, but by the time I was in for ten I had been accepted by the academy. By the time I was in for 12, I was an officer and so I loved it. And the people that you meet, the amazing thing is I was in the Army Reserves with people who had a full-time job, raising children, and going to college—we were all in it together.

CM: So tell me how you managed—how did you balance that?

BL: Well, you have to have an amazing spouse—especially when you have kids—who picks up the slack when you're not home.

CM: How old were your kids around that time?

BL: When I joined the military I only had Catherine and she was about seven years old in '76 so I had friends who would take her when I went to training, my two-week boot camp. My parents—I was in a big family—my sisters and I had great friends. Two who would pick her up after school and that kind of thing if I had a commitment? You have to have a supportive family. My husband's mom and aunt would have Cathy over with them on weekends. I'd be away during the day and home at night. When I had to go away for the weekend they'd go over there and cook all the meals. It was very regimented and certain weekends that's what I did. It was planned around that. And school—I didn't do any Christmas shopping or anything, I wouldn't dare while I was in school because I would get distracted. I had to get through that last final, that last paper before I could get into the holiday mode. So I either did my Christmas shopping for the kids before Thanksgiving or I had to do it two weeks before Christmas. It has to be very regimented. When my kids were sick and missed school, Clark [University] was great. [Laughs] Sometimes I brought my kids to class with me with books to read and they'd sit in the back of the room. I was in a graduate program so the class was anywhere from six to 12 people, small

class. Some of the classes were in the middle of the day and I was fortunate to have a job where if I had to leave two hours for a class I could put it in my schedule. It was 24 hours a day, seven days a week so it was great when cell phones came out because I remember negotiating real estate deals for the company [laughs]. You just do what you do [laughs]. I'd be out in the field in New Jersey with my cell phone. It was great that I had all that flexibility in my life because if I had a very rigid job, nine to five and no flexibility, I probably couldn't have done all the things I did.

CM: And my sense is one of your strongest traits is organizational skills [laughs].

BL: Yes, although sometimes I feel—you know I'd be home studying and my husband would take the kids off to the park and he'd be gone two or three hours because I'd have to have that unwind period. I'd sit down with my books and I'd say, "Oh, I'll throw a load of laundry in," or, "I'll just do the dishes or start dinner." It would take me an hour or hour and a half to concentrate because there's just so much to do. But it wasn't that easy. It wasn't like I could turn it on and turn it off. And my husband knew that so he'd go looking at cars and take the kids to the park. He'd be gone for the afternoon and maybe I'd get two solid hours of really good concentrated work. In the middle of all this I got breast cancer [laughs]. So I wasn't sleeping really well either. I remember my Business Law course would be two to three hundred pages every other day. I remember sitting up and reading my Business Law and my sister-in-law in Pennsylvania would call and say, "How are you doing, Bonnie?" She'd call me because she knew I'd be up studying, she'd call me at eleven o'clock at night.

CM: How old were you?

BL: When I got it? It was 1991 and I was in graduate school. My youngest two children are adopted so the girls arrived at our house September 30th and I found out I had a tumor at the end of January. So I was about 36, 37. And I think because my husband and I had tried in vitro twice, I think all those hormones are what triggered it. Fortunately, it was caught very early and I did go through chemotherapy and radiation therapy, but never missed a day of work.

CM: How old were your girls when you adopted them? Are they siblings?

BL: Yes, they are Irish twins, 13 months apart. They were two and three.

CM: So how were the girls when you were working a full-time job and working some weekends and all of that, did they have a hard time with that or was it pretty seamless?

BL: No, remarkably all of my kids grew up to be very well balanced [laughs] and organized people. It was just what mommy did and we would have family days at the unit and they would come with me and hang out with me. It was just what mom did. I think—my middle daughter is married to a Marine—I think they are all proud of my service to our country. I was deployed to the Middle East when my youngest daughter was a senior in high school and when my middle

daughter started her first year in college. That was very hard for me. And I think those were hard years for the girls.

CM: Where were you deployed?

BL: It was in 2003 when we started the war, when [President George W.] Bush declared war [on Iraq] near St. Patrick's Day, I think around the 19<sup>th</sup> [of March], and we were in country on the 23<sup>rd</sup>. We had been at Fort Drum a couple of months. I was with the 804<sup>th</sup> Medical Center which is the command and control of all medical units and we were in Kuwait. The 804<sup>th</sup> Hospital Command. They changed the name since I first started. So my unit in country was in charge of all the medical aspects to the equipment, the professional staff, doctors, nurses, and the cleaning operations. When I was deployed I was asked to be the medical regulating officer. The regulating officer's job is to coordinate all evacuation so I had myself and about seven other people [laughs] and some of those people were 19 and 20 years old and myself, and a major, and my enlisted group. We coordinated all the ground ambulances in the area and the connection with the Air Force to evacuate and it was very stimulating and it was very rewarding. It was tough because we were dealing with casualties. We were dealing with all the amputations and we were dealing with at that time—I'm digressing a bit from your question, but at that time, the military was just implementing what they called "the golden hour" where it was believed that if you could get someone with severe trauma from the place of injury to level three care within an hour that you had a better chance of saving the life. That was our mission and we did it. We did it. The only time we couldn't is when people couldn't tell us where they were. [Laughs] You might find that pretty amazing, but a lot of times people couldn't tell us where they were even if they were on a road. They didn't have—GPS is pretty common now, but GPS was just beginning to come into use in 2003 so maybe one person in the convoy would have GPS and convoys get separated and spread out. And these were young kids, 18, 19 years old. We wanted to get to them obviously as fast as we could. My staff had very ingenious things that they came up with like asking, "What's the closest town to you?" So the helicopter—which is what we were going to rescue them with—is not going to go into a hostile environment or go flying around looking for you. If you remember, helicopters were crashing and people were dying. So we had to at least know what road you were on and what was the closest town. We did everything we could. If you couldn't give us a grid coordinate at least tell us what road you are on and the nearest town and the helicopter could follow that. Convoys are pretty big so they could find a convoy. We really implemented the golden hour rule and, of course, part of our job is letting the hospitals know they are coming and having the ambulances at the landing site to get them into the hospitals. The golden hour included the telephone call, the launching of the helicopter, contacting the hospital, the ambulance to the landing field, and getting them to the emergency room.

CM: That's amazing.

BL: The helicopter units we worked with were National Guard and they were incredible. Everybody worked as hard as they could. It was a very rewarding job to have. We had,



obviously, losses that were hard to take. The other interesting thing about that particular mission was we had the U.S.N. S. Comfort off shore and like most wars they expected many, many, many casualties and they needed the hospital beds. That floating hospital with surgical capacity was in addition to all the other beds we had. They thought we would need that capacity so the Comfort was off shore. For the really first time in a combat situation, we medically regulated to a ship [laughs]. We actually had to have our helicopter crews trained in deck landing procedures and that kind of thing. We had to regulate with a ship and we had to do what was called a mIRC chat [Internet Relay Chat], computerized. So the people that I worked with were phenomenal and the rest of my unit did all the command and control of nuclear sites in Iraq. And we had to work with every other service and we had to work with other military and the Kuwaiti military as well. I don't know if you want to know this or not, but one interesting thing about this particular mission is that in other wars, in order to medically evacuate a patient you just need to know you have a patient. You don't have to know if you're male or female, we just have to know we have a patient and you're on a litter or you're ambulatory or you have a gunshot wound or whatever that we might have to deal with if we send the medics to you. And this war, the Americans in particular want to know where Bonnie Layden is. She was injured, where is she? And our system was never set up to do that. Our system was set up to get the patient to care, to take care of that patient, and then notify if we could find the unit. We had generals and ambassadors and all kinds of people calling 19-year-old soldiers [laughs] and they're asking them. And the big contracting companies and contractors were out there and they were calling too. We were managing—we were only one medical brigade. There was another in Iraq eventually and they had patients and they don't tell us [laughs]. We don't tell them. I mean the whole system is only set up to take care of a patient. It's not set up to say where did Jimmy Jones go? So we actually again, very creative 19 year old kids and computer literate set up systems for tracking names and, of course, that made our general happy because he was getting the pressure from everybody else. So it was interesting.

CM: When you first found out that you had to be deployed overseas what did that feel like? Was that exciting for you or...?

BL: Well, I guess my first reaction was my country is going to war and I want to be a part of serving my country. That was my gut, emotional reaction, but it was, "Holy crap! I've got kids and my husband has severe medical issues. So, oh no, how this is going to work for my family." And my kids were senior in high school and in college, but it was more of an emotional factor. My kid's first year in college and the financial stuff [laughs] and how is this all going to work. So my first reaction was, "I want to serve," and I talked to my husband about it. I wasn't in the medical brigade at the time. I had taken a job as an executive officer for the 405<sup>th</sup> combat support hospital in Connecticut. Half that unit deployed and my commander went with it so I was running a unit in Connecticut. I had been working at the brigade when they called me and said, "Bonnie, we would like you to take this job and we want to know if you will take it." How are you going to say no? How are you going to be in the military for 25 years taking a paycheck, working for your country and then say, "I don't want to go." [laughs] I couldn't do it. So I talked to my husband about it and he said, "Well, if that's what you think you have to do, do it."

CM: Did you know at that time that it would be one year?

BL: No, we really thought it would be, based on the Gulf War, and based on the deployment cycle that was going on, we really thought it would be six months. It turned out to be a year. And that was [laughs] obviously twice as long as we expected. Especially since President Bush got on the battleship and declared, “War over,” in May [May 1, 2003]. We really thought we would be home by September and that there would be a peacekeeping piece obviously and that somebody would come in and rotate. And we just never kept getting an answer. I had a large section in my group who were college students who already lost a semester and if they weren’t back by September were going to lose another. Things had calmed down by the time President Bush announced end game, but we were still getting casualties. So I sent half of my section home [laughs] and I said, “Let them go home.” If I have to be here—what are you going to do in a war zone? You spend 18 hours a day anyway. So four of us stayed back and the rest went home. We ended up hearing in around September that we would be replaced somewhere around January.

CM: So I imagine you were outnumbered women to men?

BL: In the military, of course, and in the hospital command that’s true, but in the hospital unit there’s more women because of the nurses and large amount of staff. Although there are male nurses, a lot of the medics and nurses are female.

CM: Do you think it is harder for a woman than a man being in the military?

BL: Oh absolutely. For one thing, there’s not a man on earth who doesn’t think he has the same level of credibility you have [laughs]—probably not news to you. So no matter what your education—and I went through every single specialty in administration—I was told to do that to protect your career because each time you get promoted you have to change jobs. Every time you change jobs you have to be qualified. So I always did all that. I often got promoted before the men which wasn’t taken well. And Operations is very testosterone filled. There are not too many female Operations officers. You could probably at any time name them on one hand in the entire Army Reserves.

CM: So, in that respect, you were outnumbered?

BL: Definitely outnumbered [laughs]. It’s hard because they don’t want to focus on what you’re trying to accomplish. It takes a lot. Fortunately, I always worked for people who chose me for the position and believed in my capabilities. So it worked. Same thing in human services. When I became CEO of a human services agency there were only one or two women in the entire state, in the entire state, that ran a human services agency. So it wasn’t new to me exactly [laughs], but it’s definitely harder.

CM: A lot of times now when we hear about women in the military it's some story that comes out in the news about some sort of harassment. Did you see any of that going on?

BL: The military, to me, is a funny incubation place. Obviously when you get men—young men—let's face it, the military is full of very young people. Females and men are young and they're dating and there's a lot of affairs that take place. The tone of sexual harassment—being in human resources I think and running a company, you're so aware of all the personnel issues about telling off-color jokes and stuff. Well, in the military, [laughs] profane language that's just common, everyday. Is it worse in some cases? Leadership has to—command structure cannot support it. If you allow it to happen it can get very out of hand. In my mind, if a guy made an off-color joke and I didn't like it, it was my job to tell him, "Knock it off, I don't want to hear it." I wouldn't call it sexual harassment. But I know sexual harassment things were filed because of that. I was working one day in the unit when a guy told an off-color joke and it was also a racial joke and there was a Black woman working with him and she laughed. I was sitting off doing my thing, I just happened to be working in the same room, and I thought, "Jeesh, you're nuts to be doing that. Just why would you do that?" I didn't think it was so terrible, but a totally stupid thing to do. And she laughed. I was at my parents for Thanksgiving and I get a call from 94<sup>th</sup> Army Command saying you have to come in for an interview. I said, "I can't come in for an interview. I'm in upstate New York." "You need to come in." "Listen to me, I'm in upstate New York with my parents, and I'm not coming in for this [laughs]. And what is it you want to know?" "Were you in the room when this statement was made?" "Yes, I was." And you go through the whole thing. So, it's out there. You can't take sexuality out of any environment where hundreds of thousands of people are living. People will engage in affairs. I had to talk to two of my female enlisted about being safe because when we were in Kuwait there were reports of rape within our compound. I would see them walking with people from other units or hear that they were off with some other unit and I said to my boss, "I'm really concerned about their safety," and he said, "Talk to them." Well, I'm not their mother, so you can't talk like a mom.

CM: Do you think you were kind of like a mother figure since you were a little older?

BL: Yes, yes. I was the head of the section and I was old enough to be their mom. So I talked to one and she said, "Well, are you talking to this person?" "Yes, I will. I'm talking to you though. Please, please, please. You are obviously an adult, you can obviously engage in sexual activities, just be safe."

CM: Young people, they aren't thinking in that way.

BL: Yes. So yes it's out there. Do people engage in sexual behavior? Do females to get promoted? Yes, they do. So it's very hard being a female. It's like being a priest. All priests are coded child [molesters]; well all females are coded by how other women behave.

CM: And that's the tricky part.

BL: Yeah

CM: But maybe not different from other fields?

BL: Probably not, except you're surrounded by hundreds of thousands living together. I did a mission up in Canada with a higher command and there were two women and the rest were all men. We're in the wilderness in Canada with moose and bears and everything else. I'm not going to sleep in a different tent [laughs] by myself, thank you very much! All we did was, we had tents you could complex so we had one we just complexed, put the canvass across it. We had our cots in the other room, then they could accuse me of snoring too loud the next day. You just do it. Women just do it. It's done and it's not a problem. And nurses in particular, working all kinds of shifts, I mean it's like a hot cot. One goes on shift and one's falling asleep. You just have to do that. It's part of your life.

CM: Do you have one memory in particular during your time over there that really stands out in your mind?

BL: I have several, but one which I think coats what our job was. We had a convoy accident call in and I was not the person taking the call. One of my sergeants, a female, was, but we were all trying to make everything work. This man had been working under the truck and he—six single wheel or something—and another section of the convoy came along and I don't know how it happened, but it rammed the vehicle and he was pinned between the two trucks. A crushing chest wound. [Pause] He probably wasn't going to live. But in order to give him a chance to live we had to figure out where they were which happened to be a problem that day with a young person calling us. But also the flight surgeon that goes on the helicopter has to know the injuries and bring a pneumatic suit. And there's not just pneumatic suits in every helicopter so when we found out it was a crushing chest wound—anyway this went on for quite a while. We had to get him into a fixed hospital and at the time we had an agreement with the only Kuwaiti hospital as part of one of our medical units with them. So we were going to send him there because that was the best operating room, best procedures, best surgeons we had. And so we had everything set up. We worked it really hard. And during the course of it we know he was in the National Guard, he has three children, and Sergeant Gardner was working it. And we did get him there. We got him in the helicopter, in the pneumatic suit, and we got him to the hospital. And as they took him from the helicopter to the hospital he expired. I think all of us cried. It was a—we tried so hard to save this man's life, but we're in a building using computers and phones, but it's not any less traumatic to lose a patient when you're trying so hard to save their life. We were the ones to save his life if he had a chance. We worked so hard on it and it was very bad.

But I think another one I'd like to tell you about, most of the people we evacuated were Iraqi civilians because on the battlefield in the military you move really fast so most of our patients were Iraqis. We had hospitals in Iraq that we regulated to, but we had this big mission where people needed level five, which is rehabilitative care, and we had so many clogging up our hospital we had to get them out. We had this big, big, big—civil affairs unit worked on this big

mission which was to get other countries in the Middle East—and you have to understand, medical facilities are very limited in the Middle East—to take these level five patients that need long-term care. They were amputees or whatever, and we just can't do that in a field hospital and they just sit there and take up space and resources we needed. So there's this big mission and in the Middle East when you move a patient you never just move the patient, there's a family member that comes with them. Which is a nice thing, but it's also a logistical thing. We always had to have MPs [Military Police] for every mission that involved civilians because you never know and of course we had prisoners of war too. We had that aspect. We had this one mission, it was a big mission, and I wanted to observe it. So I got a ride out over to the air/medical facility where we were evacuating out of a tent by the air field and coordinating and the MPs are there. Now MPs are usually 19-year-old kids so they're young and some are married and have children. There's a little girl being taken and her very elderly grandfather in all of the Eastern garb, and a cane and a staff, and the little girl. And I'm talking to him [MP] about the mission, you know, did they get the food, making sure—and he's looking at the little girl and said, "I have a daughter about her age at home," and he's crying. And this guy had biceps bigger than my leg [laughs]. But in those situations, all of a sudden—the casualty of war to civilians and women and children—all of a sudden you realize that's really what war is. You're gung ho to get out there in the military and do your job and use all of your equipment, but children and women ....

CM: I suppose to survive you have to compartmentalize and not think of that and all of a sudden it hits you when you see a child?

BL: So that was a very moving moment for me too. By that time I had realized how many women and children we were moving, but for the Military Police they are dealing with prisoners of war. They're dealing with the bad people and all of a sudden, here's this little girl.

CM: Hits you where you live huh?

BL: Yeah.

CM: What are you most proud of from your military service?

BL: [Pause and sighs] I think my deployment. I'm proud I went and that I could do the job I did. The first time ever in a war we evacuated to ships. We did things that were the first time ever like the golden hour rule. My section did an outstanding job. We did stuff that was unprecedented and had never been done in a battlefield and I was their leader. I'm very proud of that.

CM: I'm not going to be able to go over too much about your other career, but how did some of the lessons learned in the military transfer back home in your career in human services?

BL: Actually both my careers dovetailed. All my experience in human services of personnel management, budget, logistics, hiring, firing, discipline, in both they overlap. Running a not-for-

profit corporation—and we grew, when I was hired it was a two hundred and fifty thousand dollar a year organization and when I left it was over twenty-three million. We had 16 employees when I started; we had close to 600 when I left. So as I grew up in the military, as I got promoted and grew up, I was also [laughs] growing up, if you will, in human services. I was getting a ton of experience and besides in the military you have that command structure, there's not a real difference whether you're running a military unit or you're running a not-for-profit business. You have your head of personnel, you have finance, you have your equipment, your houses, whatever, and you're caring for patients, you're caring for, in my case, people with disabilities.

CM: Is that the core group that you were serving?

BL: Developmental disabilities. Over half of them had physical disabilities as well. And obviously we were very medically involved. Toward the end, before I retired, we were opening medically oriented programs for people that had been living in institutions, but who needed ongoing nursing, skilled nursing. We were building houses and creating programs with nursing staff.

CM: You did residential programs?

BL: Yes. We had over 54 pieces of residential property. Six of them we leased to the state and they ran their own programs and the rest were ours.

CM: What has that work meant to you?

BL: That work has meant—I worked in that field for 42 years. I worked 7 ½ years in New York running the food service training piece and then I came down here and was a residential director then a CEO. It's my life's work. If you had asked me when I was 19 years old and graduating from college would I have seen this I would have said, "No." My first interview for rehab—they were opening a new rehab center and they were looking for someone to set up the food service not only to feed everyone there, but also to train people so they can go out and get jobs. The big question in the interview was, "How do you feel about working with people with handicaps, who were mentally retarded?" I had a cousin who was developmentally disabled so I said, "Fine." [laughs] My cousin grew up with us, you know? My aunt and uncle were my favorite aunt and uncle so, "Fine. I have a cousin with Down Syndrome." And that was the big interview question [laughs]. It's interesting because it led me to change my direction from being a dietician to working in psychology and then going on in human services.

CM: This is probably an impossible question to answer. Do you favor one career over the other? Your human services as opposed to your military? Or is it just impossible?

BL: It really is impossible to tell you which one I favor. I mean I am really proud of the military service and I have friends who are friends for life and are like brothers and sisters to me. In

human services, the people I worked with was so rewarding. I was so fortunate that I was in a position where I could determine the quality of those services. When you're in a leadership position you make decisions about how the services are going to be put together and we did some very innovative stuff that other companies started to emulate. I mean people were warehoused; we're not doing warehousing. We're going to have homes. The state always referred to our houses as beautiful homes. That was my goal. This is a person's home. It's not a place where the staff come and work [laughs]. You're coming to someone's home. So I'm very proud of that.

CM: That's wonderful work. I think from the stories you've been telling me, I think I understand some of the benefits of serving in the military. What are the costs of serving in the military? What are the downsides?

BL: I missed so many family events. A lot of baptisms, even weddings and funerals. I missed some family funerals. Weekends doing more things with my kids. My kids didn't complain about it.

CM: Do you think it's because they were a little bit older? Especially when you were deployed, they weren't ...

BL: When they were smaller they always had Nanny and Kay those weekends. They loved those kids to death. My older daughter probably more because I had to go to boot camp when she was seven years old. And annual training in the summer. By that time I had gotten divorced so those were the weeks I had to schedule her dad, "You need to take these weeks." We lived in two different states. So I think she had it hard.

CM: When you came back from your deployment, again your girls were a little older, but I've heard stories of great difficulty from women reintegrating back into the family after a year away. Did you find any difficulties?

BL: The difficulty was more with my husband and I then with the kids. My husband and I, although he knew what it meant to me, I think he was upset I was gone and he had to deal with two teenaged girls [laughs]. And I think there was a lot of anger there. I would call as often as I could—I was fortunate because I was in a situation where I could get access to phone service and call him on a weekly basis, but there was a lot of anger there. We celebrated our 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary shortly after I got home and it was a little stressful.

CM: Did it just take some time?

BL: Yes.

CM: I've heard some stories, especially with young children, really young children sometimes they even forget mom for a while and those kinds of things. So I can imagine it's stressful for

everybody in a family. A couple of final questions. During difficult times who do you turn to for support or what do you do for yourself to help through a difficult time? You've described several: your illness to being deployed to crazy work schedules.

BL: Well, when I worked, it was work. When I went through cancer, going to school and going to work and I was in a grad program at the time and I didn't stop going to classes. And I was in the Reserves and I was working. Those, obviously, and the kids too. Both of the kids had learning disabilities when we adopted them [laughs]. So I just focused on what was happening. At work I focused—a couple of times, I remember one night I was getting out of the shower and my hair was falling out and I was at the top of the stairs and I just sat down on the top of the stairs and I just cried. And my kids came running and said, "Mommy what's wrong, what's wrong? Daddy, Mommy's crying." [laughs] But basically I just focused. If I was doing soccer with the kids or dance with the kids, whatever I was doing I just—I keep very busy as you can tell—so being very busy helps.

CM: Final question: what would you like the public or anyone listening to this or reading it in the future, what would you like them to know about women who serve in the military.

BL: [laughs] That we do real military jobs. That we do them just as well as our male peers, sometimes better. I know some incredible women in the military, nurses and doctors, and they're just incredible. I'd like especially other women to understand that these are real military war-time jobs and we do them. And we are proud to be there. We're there, in my case, by choice in the Army Reserves. Nobody forces any woman to be in the military so you are there by choice. You don't have to sign up to be in the military, women don't have to. They're there because they want to be there.

CM: Thank you very much for this interview and thank you for your service. I appreciate it very much.