BRENDA BERKMAN INTERVIEW
MAKERS: WOMEN WHO MAKE AMERICA
KUNHARDT FILM FOUNDATION

Brenda Berkman
Firefighter & Activist
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Interviewed by Betsy West
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ON SCREEN TEXT:

Makers: Women Who Make America

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ON SCREEN TEXT:

Brenda Berkman

Firefighter & Activist

Brenda Berkman

Former Firefighter and Activist

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BETSY WEST:

Why a firefighter? Why did you want to be a firefighter so much?

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BRENDA BERKMAN:

Well, there were a lot of reasons. I think the primary reason was because I always saw firefighting as a great way of helping your community, because when people are in their direst hour of need and they don't know who else to call, they call the Fire Department. And so the Fire Department, stereotypically, does everything from taking cats out of trees to going into a fire building, to getting people out of stuck elevators, to going to electrical emergencies, to doing medical incidents.

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We do it all, and that really appealed to me. So even though I didn't have any family on the job and I didn't really know all that much, I had this picture in my mind that that would be a great thing to do with my life. And I figured that if I didn't like firefighting, I could always go back to practicing law. Firefighting, it turns out, was really suited to my personality. You don't sit behind a desk all day long.

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Every day that you go into work, you never know what you're gonna face that day. Sometimes that can be a little scary and intimidating, but it's also very challenging mentally and physically. I like the mental and physical challenges of it all. I was a little jock as a girl. Even though it was pre-Title IX, I was desperately trying to play sports my whole childhood and basically as a girl being told, “Oh, no, girls don't do that. Girls don't do that.”

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And I think that for me as a kid growing up, one of the turning points in my life, in terms of wanting to pursue something that I thought I'd be good at but people felt was really inappropriate for women and ultimately led to my joining the fire service, was the fact that I had attempted to join Little League. And my mother had sent in the money for it and I was turned down because I was a girl.

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And there was no other reason other than my gender. I mean, growing up, I was as good a ballplayer as the little boys in my neighborhood. And so, certainly if it were based purely on ability, I would have been accepted into Little League. But the coach called up my mother and asked if B. Berkman was a girl or a boy and she said it was her daughter and he said, “Well, we're very sorry, but we don't let girls into Little League.” And there were just a lot of instances like that.

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Not all in sports, but in school definitely, where girls were expected to take “home ec,” you could not take shop. I wanted to make a birdhouse or an ashtray or something, I did not want to make a blouse. And the blouse that I brought home, my mother was like, [Brenda exclaims.] She was a sewer. It was like, “How could your teacher let you waste his material on this blouse?” I had no interest in sewing.

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And so, as a kid growing up, I really was interested in very active pursuits that were typically identified with boys. And I think that as an adult, I had just

had it. I said, “Hey.” They’ve kept women out of the fire service all these years. Women were not even allowed to apply to become firefighters until 1977.

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So that meant it didn't matter if you were an Olympic caliber athlete, it didn't matter if your entire male side of your family had been in the fire service since 1492. It did not matter. If you were born a girl, you were not going to be allowed to even apply to become a New York City firefighter. And that changed in 1977, as a result of the application of Title VII to municipalities.

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BETSY WEST:
But then when you decided to do this, when you said, “Okay, I’m going to go for it, I’m going to take advantage of this,” did you have any idea what you were up against?

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BRENDA BERKMAN:
I had a little idea of what I was up against because as a law student, and then as a lawyer, I had worked on some sex discrimination cases, including one that involved New York City women police officers, which everyone conveniently forgets in New York City, that up until the mid 1970s, New York had a quota on women in the police department. There could not be more than three percent women police officers.

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Didn't matter what your score was on the police officer exam. So men with much lower scores on the police officer exam were hired ahead of women. And when the layoffs occurred in the 1970s as a result of the fiscal crisis, the women protested, "Hey, we were the last hired, now we are the first fired." And this is because they wouldn't hire us because of this illegal quota they had on the hiring of women. Also, they weren't allowed out on patrol, which meant that when they went to take promotional exams-

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Well, anyway, I knew all this. I worked on this stuff. And I saw how the women police officers, who had challenged the police department and the city about their illegal discrimination, were really retaliated against by the police department. And they were sent out to these godforsaken patrol posts by themselves. They never knew whether they'd get backup if they got into a jam. They were ostracized, they were ridiculed.

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All kinds of things happened to these women police officers. So I had some clue. But I have to say that there's no way that any of us who went into that first group of women hired by the New York City Fire Department could have understood the level and intensity of the opposition to women coming on.

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The fire service, more so than police—maybe combat military still has those same kind of barriers—but the fire service really was, as one guy put it, "the last bastion of male workplace." That was it. And the union opposed my lawsuit. And then as the name class- And that went on and on and on.

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And so- And then as a named class plaintiff in the lawsuit, and I was the only person who challenged the test. None of the other women challenged the entrance exam for a firefighter. Even though 90 women had actually taken the physical abilities portion, and over 400 had taken and passed the written portion of the exam, nobody else decided to challenge the test. Just me.

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So that made me the special target of people who were opposed to women coming on the job. And so, the stuff that happened, certainly in the first seven years going into the first ten years of my career in the Fire Department, was extremely nasty. Everything from pornography being sent to my home address, to people following me around the streets, to death threats telephoned to my home telephone number,-

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-to really severe harassment in the Fire Academy and in the firehouse. And also I got fired, which I had to bring another lawsuit. Go back to court, and fight my termination and the termination of another woman who was fired at the same time as I was. So this just went on and on and on.

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BETSY WEST:
Tell me a little about the harassment.

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BRENDA BERKMAN:

Well, a lot of them didn't say anything to me, and wouldn't talk to me at all. And so that was very difficult, especially in the beginning, because I didn't know anything about firefighting. And the way that- And especially in those days where the fire academy was very, very brief, the way that you learned the job was that the senior members in your firehouse would take you under—all men at that point—would take you under their wing and they would teach you things.

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Well, with a couple of notable exceptions. For the first seven years of my career, people would not mentor me at all. They just wouldn't talk to me. And when I would go to a fire with people, I had no idea whether they would actually be there if I needed them. That was really devastating because not only did I not get the training, but also I didn't get any of the camaraderie which is such an important part of the firehouse.

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It's what makes a job a joy. The job really is a million laughs. I mean, that's why people don't quit. Nobody retired with only 20 years, up until 9/11 hit, in the New York City Fire Department. People typically went 25, 30, 35, 40 years before they retired, because the job can be a million laughs and it can be a lot of fun. I was getting none of that because I was being ostracized.

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They would turn my locker upside down, they'd mess with my protective gear, they'd drain my air tanks, they messed with the equipment that I had to

use. If I went to a job and and I asked people a question- I asked one of the guys a question like, where's such and such on another fire truck or whatever, looking for a piece of equipment, they'd walk away from me, they wouldn't talk to me.

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So, it was a little bit beyond belief, because it seemed to me that not only were they putting my personal health and safety at risk by their actions, but they were putting their own health and safety at risk. Because now they had a person on the team with them—and firefighting is very much a team effort—so now you have a person on the team with you who's not being developed, who is not being brought along, and who is not being given the necessary information to really help out the team and make the team stronger.

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So that seemed incredibly stupid to me. But the fire department really did very little in terms of holding people accountable for their bad behavior.

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BETSY WEST:
Let me ask you about life in the fire house. What was it like living there as a woman?

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BRENDA BERKMAN:

Well, in the beginning, it was quite terrible because one of the things that they did was they put me out of the meal, which meant that the men would not allow me to eat with them. And so I complained about this to my officers. I said, "Listen, I'm at work for 9 hours, and 15 hours at a time, and very occasionally 24 when I got called for overtime or something, and everybody else is eating." That's a big communal thing. When you sit down, you're eating, you're talking about what's going on on the job, you're talking about the fire you just went to, blah, blah, blah…

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None of that. I had none of that. I wasn't allowed to eat with them. So then the officer said, "Oh, all right, well, they're entitled to do that. Because you're a bad person, because you complained about something that was going on, and so this is what you get for being a complainer." And I'm like, "All right. This is not right, but anyway, what am I supposed to do about it?" And so, all I had to eat was peanut butter and jelly. Now you might ask yourself, "Well, how come I didn't just go out and get my own food?"

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Well, because to make your own food in the kitchen while everybody else is making their big meal together and everything, I mean, it was just too brutal. And so I ate a lot of peanut butter and jelly. And for years after that, I would not eat peanut butter and jelly because it reminded me of what was going on. They put a huge bra—I mean, huge, I don't know where this bra came from—and it had my initials on the cups and they had that hanging up.

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They had the worst kind of pornography all over the place. They did not- All the committee work that we did together where we made our beds and did things, my bed, where they knew I'd be sleeping for the night, was never made up. It had crap all put in it. And some of the guys who were not witnessing this thought that the women were complaining about the typical pranks that were played on new firefighters.

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And there was actually an interview that was done with this one guy and he's like, “Oh well, the pranks, the hazing, that's intended to bring new firefighters tightly into the group.” Well, we weren't experiencing the same kind of pranks. We were getting dead rats put in our pockets of our protective equipment. We were getting our boots pissed in. We were- You really don't want to put your foot in a boot that smells like piss. Then… And worse.

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One woman had a condom put in her sandwich. That kind of stuff. And so this was the kind of stuff that was going on, and there was no way that that was intended to make the women feel like part of the team. It really was intended to send the very clear message that you are not wanted here. You would be better off if you left. This is never gonna stop. And frankly, your life might be at risk if you pursue this.

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And the fire department did almost nothing to stop that. Now, one of the things that they could easily have done was to have prepared both the men and the women for a two gender workforce. It wasn't like there weren't

models of that out there for them to go to, whether it was the military which had recently integrated the military academies or the police department which had recently put women out on patrol, corrections, whatever.

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But they didn't. And instead, they told the captains of the houses where the women were assigned, that if the captains could come up with a good excuse for firing the women, they would back the captains. And so the captains basically had carte blanche to start creating a record of failure on the women firefighters.

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BETSY WEST:
How the hell did you put up with this?

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BRENDA BERKMAN:
Well, in addition to my law degree, I have a degree in American history. I have a graduate degree in American history. And one of the things that I studied while I was in school was the struggles of women to get the right to vote, to integrate other kinds of jobs, and I recognized- And not only just women, but also other civil rights struggles.

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And I had grown up in the period of the second wave of civil rights struggles in our country, for African American rights and also then for the women's

movement and then for gay and lesbian rights, and I realized that people were killed for trying to get the same rights. I mean, it wasn't that long ago that we had Jim Crow in this country.

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And I also had seen how the African American firefighters had been treated in the past in the Fire Department and how difficult their struggles had been, and the women police officers. So all these different things, I realized that it was an important cause and there were going to be prices to be paid. And that for me to quit, go back to practice law—

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—number one, I would be depriving myself of the opportunity to do a job that I really thought I could be good at and that I knew that I would love if I just had the same chance at it that the guys had. And also, I felt like, as the person who was constantly being put out there as the leader of the women's organization, that if I quit, the department would interpret that as sort of open season on the rest of the women.

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And that one by one, they'd be picked off or forced out in some way or another. So I really felt like, that it was important not to give up. And obviously that takes a tremendous toll on you personally. But again, I really feel that- I look to other women and men who had really had long struggles to try and accomplish things as my inspiration.

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BETSY WEST:
Was there a turning point when things started to get better?

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BRENDA BERKMAN:
I don't know about better. Well, yes, my definition of better was like so… not better for most people-

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BETSY WEST:
Somebody talked to you-

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BRENDA BERKMAN:
Well, yeah. But no, I remember the day I was working as a firefighter in Brooklyn, and this has got to be like seven or eight years into my career, and I was assigned to work in a firehouse I'd never worked in before. I was just being sent there for the tour. And I walked in the door and I said my name to the guy, and it was clear from the way he reacted that he didn't know who I was.

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And I thought, "Yay!" I mean, now I have reached the point where there are some people in this department that may give me the chance and make their

decision about whether they're going to like me or not like me, or want to work with me or not want to work with me, based on who I actually am,-

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-rather than based on what they've been told or think that they know based on a bunch of rumors or some newspaper article or something that has nothing to do with reality and certainly nothing to do with how I am personally. And that really made it feel like things could be different.

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BETSY WEST:
And toward the end of your career, had things improved? Had you found any colleagues? Did you have any camaraderie ever?

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BRENDA BERKMAN:
Oh, yeah, absolutely.

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BETSY WEST:
How did that happen?

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BRENDA BERKMAN:

Well, one of the things that happened was I got promoted. About 11 or 12 years into my career, I got promoted to lieutenant. And actually, I think I was much more suited to be an officer than a firefighter just because some of the things that throw new officers off, in terms of being able to be a supervisor, is like the paperwork. It didn't bother me at all.

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Separating yourself from the firefighters, not being able to be best friends and buddies with every firefighter that you work with. Didn't bother me at all. I was like so used to not being part of the gang in the kitchen that having to be the person in charge and say- be the bad guy and say, "We can't be doing this," or now we have to go out do this unpleasant task, something like that, it didn't really strike me the same way that it did a lot of the male supervisors.

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So that happened. And I really started enjoying the job a lot. It meant new things to learn. And when you're the officer, you get respect just by virtue of rank. I'm not saying that women officers are treated exactly the same as male officers in the New York City Fire Department. There's still a lot of people out there who believe that women are inherently inferior to men in this job and that nothing that they do to prove themselves otherwise is going to make any difference.

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That's a small group. The overwhelming majority of people sit on a fence and don't take a position one way or the other. And then there's a small group of men who genuinely like working with women and they fully accept them. So I

started to be treated more for who I actually was, rather than who people thought I was, the stereotypical person, and that got better and better.

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Then I started working with some upper echelon people, and actually, by the time I retired a couple of months ago, I had men who had mentored me and who wanted me to work on projects that they were in charge of. They were of higher rank than me and they saw that I had skills that they could use, and occasionally I made them laugh. And so, they took me in, even though other people said, "Oh no, you want to work with Berkman? Oh my God," and that kind of thing. And they went beyond that.

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BETSY WEST:
Speaking of laughing, I remember people making jokes about female firefighters. Tell me a little bit about that. It seems like you were the butt of a lot of…

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BRENDA BERKMAN:
Oh, we were. And it really struck a chord with me with what happened with the Rutgers women basketball team, because we were constantly being ridiculed in the media by people who had never met us, who had- including women, okay? And I remember, not long after I came on, I was the subject of an inner circle skit.

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I did not consider myself to be a public figure. You know the inner circle where all the media people get together and make fun of the politicians every year?

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BETSY WEST:
In New York City?

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BRENDA BERKMAN:
In New York City. So they made fun of me and I was like, some little probationary firefighter. And yes, I was a named class plaintiff but that didn't mean that I was putting myself out there to be ridiculed in public and that kind of stuff really was quite personally devastating.

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And the thing that I really had a hard time learning, and I'm not sure anyone ever completely is able to take this in, is to try not to take that stuff personally. Because you become a symbol of something, of a change that makes a lot of people uncomfortable, and it has nothing to do with you personally. Those people did not know me. They'd never had a conversation with me. They had no idea what I was about.

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They had no idea how much I loved the job, how much I cared about my work, how incredibly hard I worked to try and learn the job. They felt that I could just be ridiculed.

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BETSY WEST:
It must have been very painful. Especially with what you were going through on the job, to have that on the outside world must have been hard.

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BRENDA BERKMAN:
It was. I mean, there was, I think, a backlash that was going on from the conservative segments of American society that decided that the women's movement had gone too far. And what was a more perfect example of that than women in firefighting and women in the military, in combat. And so, we really became the-

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Those groups of women really became the sort of symbol for the excesses of the women's movement. Because after all, wasn't it completely ridiculous that women would be able to pull you out of a burning building? It wasn't completely ridiculous! We were doing it! But that didn't seem to sway the opinion polls that much. The fact that women had-

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And before New York, women had been not only volunteer firefighters, but had been paid firefighters. But New York was seen as sort of like the macho of the macho, and we were also, by far, the largest. And New York had a history of resisting every kind of change, whether it was switching over to mechanized fire trucks from horse drawn fire trucks, whether it was the use of breathing apparatus—anything you could name, if it was a change, it was resisted by the New York City Fire Department.

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BETSY WEST:
How did the public react to female firefighters?

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BRENDA BERKMAN:
Well, we had people who were interviewed, screaming that lives were gonna be lost and that the fires would get bigger because these useless women were fighting fires now. And then they had things like- They had women who were actually writing letters to the editor of the Daily News and the Post and the Times, saying things like, "I don't want to be saved by a woman firefighter," which always really amused me because it was like, what were you gonna do?

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Were you gonna like, wear a little button that identified you as somebody who would only be saved by a male firefighter? And the other thing was, how would they know? Because they would be unconscious or incapacitated, and

in most cases, people didn't even realize we were on the trucks because we had our gear on. When we were actually working on a job, you couldn't tell the men from the women until the women opened their mouths. So it was only when we said something that they could identify us as women, because we got just as dirty, we were just as bundled up, we had our face pieces on, we had short hair.

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There was no way that you could tell us from the men. So that always- I was like, "Okay, well." And then it was always like, there was like this woman who was some honcho at the Daily News and she said, "A woman firefighter has to be able to carry a person down 30 flights of stairs," which there's no way that any person, not even Arnold Schwarzenegger in his heyday, is going to be able to do that.

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I mean, that's not how we rescue people. We drag them out, and by the time we get them out in the hallway or at the stairs, there's like a lot of people around and there's gonna be a lot of people carrying the person out.

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BETSY WEST:
Did you ever have anyone recognize that you were a woman on the job and were surprised when they did realize who you were?

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BRENDA BERKMAN:

Oh, absolutely. And most of the time, people were very positive when they did see women on the trucks or they did see you at a job. You took your face piece off, and after a while, women were allowed to grow their hair out a little bit longer, so maybe your hair tumbled down or something, or you started talking and they're like, "A woman firefighter!" And a lot of times, they would say, "You go, girl. That's great." And especially African Americans.

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I think because they identified very closely with our struggles, they were very supportive of us. And in fact, the only organization within the fire department that supported women in the early days was the organization for African American firefighters called the Vulcan Society.

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BETSY WEST:

How were you influenced by the women's movement? Personally in your life, both initially and then when you got into the fire department.

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BRENDA BERKMAN:

Well, growing up, I would say that my first courageous pioneer that I idolized and really became a role model for me was Billie Jean King, and her struggle to make sure that women had the same opportunities in professional tennis that the men had. I played tennis as a kid and I really admired the way that

she stood up, even when other women tennis players didn't support her, because she knew it was the right thing to do.

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Then, as the women's movement became more and more aware of people like Gloria Steinem and Betty Friedan, those women became role models for me. I had women teachers that were role models for me because they were examples of women being able to use their brains and go on to accomplish things and lead independent lives. I mean, I was growing up in the 1950s and there was really a tremendous amount of pressure.

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If you were gonna work outside the home, you were either gonna be a teacher, a nurse or a secretary. That was pretty much it. And then of course, once you got married, you did not work outside the home anymore because you were gonna have children and you had to stay home with the children. And this was the way that I was basically brought up. But as the '60s came along and women got more and more involved in the civil rights movement, then we came up with the second wave of women-

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But I'm ashamed to say that I read a tremendous number of history books as a kid growing up, I was a voracious reader and I was always looking for the woman heroines. I wanted to be out on the frontier with the men, having adventures, doing all that stuff, where were all these women? You knew that they were out there somewhere, but nobody ever wrote about them.

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And the fact that there were women who went into the factories as Rosie the Riveter's, or women who volunteered for the Armed Forces in World War I and World War II, not to mention all the wars further back, none of that stuff was around. And it was only when I was in college that I was actually able to start reading about women in history.

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And all that study of history and that real interest in finding out what happened to these women, that really influenced me tremendously growing up.

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BETSY WEST:
Did you have what people referred to as a click moment ever? You know when you were a younger woman, a moment when you went, "Oh my god. This isn't fair."

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BRENDA BERKMAN:
Well, the click moment for me was when I was turned down for joining Little League. And that may seem really trivial to people, but when you were a little girl growing up in the '50s, and you really liked to play sports and there were no opportunities, to be turned down just because you were a girl was for me a big click moment. And that went on all the way through junior high where teachers would say to you, "Well, little girls are really good in English so you

should concentrate on English and not on math and science. You can't take shop. You have to-”

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I mean, there was just click moment after click moment. And the president of the student council was invariably a boy. The girls could be secretary of the student council but whatever. So if you were a girl growing up in the '50s, you certainly had plenty of opportunities for click moments.

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BETSY WEST:
Do you think that young women today know what you went through?

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BRENDA BERKMAN:
I think that young women don't realize the degree of suffering that women and even some of their male supporters who were retaliated against for supporting the women's movement, the hardships that they had to put up with to accomplish these things. It certainly was never a matter of some judge signing an order and then, boom, things magically changed overnight.

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Because as- Even the judge in my case—I'm sure he'd be one of the first to admit—that he could not be with me in the firehouse 24/7, and there was no order that he was going to issue that was going to protect me in those early days from harassment discrimination. And then even if you didn't bring a

lawsuit, if you just went out there and tried to make what you regarded as a small change, a lot of times the resistance to even small changes was very long standing.

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It took years and years. Do these young women know that Susan B. Anthony and Elizabeth Cady Stanton never actually got a chance to legally cast a vote in the United States? And now, young women don't go and even bother to vote in elections. I mean, to me, this is shocking. This is really shocking that the stuff that women really struggled for in this country over hundreds of years is so easily dismissed as not being important.

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One of the depressing statistics to me is the fact that, recently I came back from a women firefighters conference and we were told that the number of young women applying to be firefighters is actually dropping. Now this is something that is inconceivable to me. Why? People don't want a good job that pays them $80,000 a year to work two days a week and have a pension after 20 years and healthcare benefits? Hello, any of you care to sign up?

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I mean, healthcare benefits, unlimited sick leave. Yes, occasionally you have some scary things you have to do and maybe your health is impacted a little bit, but I don't think you're gonna make $80,000 a year for working two days a week doing nails. And I don't think every young woman out there is going to win American Idol, sad to say. So, there are really good jobs out there.

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The number of women in construction, the number of women in the trades, has not gone up significantly from when the women's movement first got us the right to apply for those jobs in the 1960s and 1970s. And I think a lot of it is that young women today just have no idea that there were struggles involved to open these doors.

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And as these doors are slowly closing or still have to be kicked open for women to enter, I don't know that they feel that it's an important thing to undertake, the way that we did. And that concerns me because all those opportunities should be open to anyone regardless of their gender, and it should be based purely on your abilities and your interests and nothing to do with what society has as a stereotype about the appropriate roles for women and men.

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For many years, I've said in interviews that… I really wasn't that interested in making a political point, or a sociological point or whatever you want to call it, about integrating the New York City Fire Department. But in reflection, I really think that I was.

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Because there's just this accumulation of things that happened to me as a little girl, where I just finally had it. And I said to myself, whether consciously or unconsciously in the whole swirling of the women's movement around me, that enough is enough already, and somebody has to stand up to what's wrong about sexism. What's wrong about discrimination based on gender.

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And if I didn't do it, well, then who was gonna do it? And in the case of the New York City Fire Department, nobody was going to do it, because none of the other women had challenged it. So I really felt like, it was time for me to take a stand.

END TC: 00:39:15:00