

Briana O'Higgins interviewing Molly McMillian, aviation reporter for the Wichita Eagle.

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Molly are you from Wichita?

I am. I grew up in Wichita.

Were you aware of Boeing growing up? What did you know of Boeing while you were growing up?

I was very aware of Boeing growing up because my dad worked for Boeing for 30 years and he retired from there in 1989. So.

Was your father the only family member that worked at Boeing?

He came here he and my mother are from Iowa, and my uncle came out to Boeing in the early 50s to take a job out here because Boeing was hiring at that time and so my dad and my mom moved out here in 1953. My dad started out on the flight line in 1953 with Boeing.

When you were growing up do you kind of remember what the talked about Boeing was, in the house, amongst your family? What did, you remember talking with your dad about?

Um, you know it was funny because, you know, like a lot of the kids that I went to school with their parents worked, or their fathers mainly at that time, worked at Boeing. And um, you know when you saw a plane fly over the kids in the neighborhood would say, well my dad helped build that plane. Or sometimes you would go, 'My dad built that plane.' But, haha, I guess there is some pride that, um, you know your parents were off building airplanes in Wichita. And, in fact in the early 1970s in one of the downturns my father, after 15 years, got laid off with a lot of other people and we moved to Texas for a couple of years and then came back and he went to work for Cessna for a while and then eventually got back on at Boeing, and then finished out his career there.

What were his, sort of, feelings about Boeing, do you remember, when he got laid off and had to move?

It was tough. It was very tough. In the 15 years a lot of, they cut pretty deep and I was a kid then, so I don't recall how many people were laid off at the time. But, um, it was you know, he was out of work for a while and got a job down in Texas and he went first before the rest of the family and then we followed. I remember when he pulled out of the parking to drive to San Antonio for the first time that I had, I didn't

think I had ever seen my dad cry, but uh, he had tears in his eyes when he pulled out of the driveway.

He made the decision to go back to Boeing, do you remember if that was a hard decision for him, or what?

No. In fact that was an easy decision for him because he had kept his seniority, and kept his recall rights and I guess that is what you called them at the time. And, um so it was easy for him because he wanted to get back there.

It sounds like there wasn't a ton of animosity; he just recognized Boeing was going through a hard time.

Right, and you know the history of Boeing and the industry in general and Boeing in particular is very cyclical and we've seen that with our other companies here in Wichita. Um, our general aviation companies. Cessna, Hawker-Beechcraft. Lear-Jet. Um, and in previous downturns it seems like when one industry is down, like aerospace, general aviation was doing well, so you could transfer over to one of the other companies. And if general aviation was down, aerospace was doing better. So, there was this transfer of talent, I guess, if you would among the companies here for a very long time. Now this last downturn, its, that's not been the case. Um, although aerospace held well. But, um, you know, there wasn't a lot of wholesale hiring at the other plants.

What degrees do you hold from which universities or colleges?

Um, I have a bachelors in communication from Wichita State.

And will you describe your path from college at WSU to your position here?

Um, I was a non traditional student, so I went back, um, after getting married, having children and doing some other things and went back to school in 1989 and graduated from there in 94. And, went, my first job out of at, in journalism I guess out of college was in Topeka with a startup magazine called the Kansas Business Report and I was managing editor of that startup publication. Steve, um, Pete Stauffer had been the former publisher of the Topeka Capital Journal started the publication. So, I was there for a while. It got, once the publication got sold the whole Stauffer group was sold to Morris, Morris put the magazine group back up for sale, so there were some transitional things going on, and I was commuting. And um, so the Wichita Business Journal offered me a job and so I came back to Wichita for that. And then about 8 months later the Eagle offered be a position and that was in 1995, so ive been there ever since.

And the position you were offered is that the position that you hold?

It was on the business desk. Which I am still a business reporter, but it was actually, I first started as a banking reporter, and then I went to real estate, retail and economic development. And when the aviation beat, um, came up in 99 I believe when our aviation reporter at the time, Bob Cox went down to Fort Worth and I took over the aviation beat and it has kind of stuck.

When you were taking over, or decided that you wanted that, um, I guess did you decide that you wanted it, or what were your feelings about the aviation.

Um, it was two way, they asked me if I would fill in, and I had covered aviation and manufacturing as one of my beats at the Wichita Business Journal and I had also covered some of that at the Kansas Business Report, so I was familiar with the beat, so to speak. And, um, no, I wanted to cover it. I like aviation and aerospace and it is so important to Wichita. And that is one nice thing about the Eagle too, they really do realize what the aviation industry means to the city. You know it is a very key part of our economy.

This might not be relevant, my Boeing history is spotty, but did you cover any of the strikes at Boeing?

I did. In fact, about a month after I got to the Eagle in 95 Boeing went on strike here. And even though I wasn't the aviation reporter I did some strike coverage because it lasted almost two months, I believe. And, or maybe a little bit over two months. And so I did, that was kind of my first, you know, two in the water about strikes in Wichita.

What were your feelings about covering the strike and what was that experience like for you?

Well, it was interesting because you know, you kind of walk this line between what do the people on the picket line say, what does the union say, what are their issues. And then what does the company say about those. So you are in continual conversations with both really. So it really was, a, those are interesting things. Interesting times, and hard on both company and employees that are striking. It is not an easy situation for either side.

Do you remember what the reaction was, generally, to your stories?

Around the strikes it seems like there is kind of a division with people who sympathize with the strikers and say, you know, they are the ones that are fighting for wages, benefits. And, the ones that say well it's the unions that are you know, getting our wages out of wack and that's why companies cant be competitive. So, there is a lot of back and forth, and you know even today, when I write about contract coverage, or even Boeing leaving there is this conversation when people leave comments on online stories about it's the unions fault. No we are the ones that

are helping, you know keep wages and benefits in Wichita. So, um, it is always interesting to read those, they get fairly heated at some times.

And the strikes are one of those times.

What changes did you cover at Boeing at over the course of your career?

Um, there has been several big moments since 99. I think when I first took over the aviation beat um, times were pretty good and people were employed and then I think the first big thing, probably was the 911 terrorist attacks. And it was two weeks later that Boeing announced that they were cutting thousands of jobs. Um, company wide. And Boeing Wichita said that they were citing 5,000 jobs in the next, you know year. By the middle of the following year and because people were flying less, and airlines were buying fewer planes, so um, that was kind of the, maybe the first big moment. It started. You know the economy was already starting to change a little bit before the attacks and then it really went into um, more of a decline after the attacks. Um, and then it picked up again, where by the, by 2008 business generally, business aviation especially was going gangbusters including in Wichita where Cessna was hiring like crazy and Hawker, Learjet and they were just building as many planes as they possibly could handle, and the waiting lists were very long, so um, times were very good.

It was only two years I guess that you were reporting on the aviation beat before September 11th, but how did that sort of change your job? That one day.

Um, it made it not a fun. (Laugh.) you know its an important thing to cover, like what is happening and what is the effect and what's happening to employees and to the car dealers, to restaurants and movie theaters when people are worried if they have a job or not and then they find that they don't. Or they see their friends leave and they stay and some of the actually get a little bit of survivor guilt that you know it is tough for them both when you watch your coworkers walk out the door, and it is tough if you are the person who is walking out the door. Um, so, and but like I said it is a cyclical industry and if you have, stuck around in Wichita for say 30 years there are a lot of people here that maybe have rotated and worked at a couple of companies, of even three companies as the cycles have hit, so.

What sort of relationships have you sort of made and cultivated in the aviation industry in Wichita?

Um, with Boeing?

Yeah.

I have met a lot of interesting people, a lot of smart people in this town, from the mechanics who really have to know their job and everything is so precise and to the engineers who design it and people who maintain them and there is just some cool

stuff going on. And I love being in the factories, I really do. Because if you go to, well, and now Spirit, but if you go to the 737 line you know, it is busy. You can hear the rivet's guns and the, people are everywhere. If you go to the 787 line, and I guess this is Spirit again now, but it is a Boeing product, that's composite, you know they lay up the composites um, it takes fewer people but it is very new technology, I guess if you will. So people have to figure out what layers and how thick this is in this part and how thick it is in that part. And that's simplifying it, because it is much more complicated than that but, um, there really are some brilliant people here. Um, and Boeing has had some interesting projects. In the 90s they modified two 747s which have become Air Force One. And that is an amazing airplane with highly sophisticated communications systems on it. You know, all these high classified information that the people that worked on that had to have high security clearances and that so. And then when the air-born laser was here, where they modified a 747 that could shoot down missiles using lasers, chemical lasers, um, that was designed here. Modified here, someone had to develop a special seal that would seal off the chemicals in the back of the airplane from the pilots in the front of the airplane and as the plane takes off and lands you know, it expands and contracts. And so that, that seal had to expand and contract with it, its just amazing technology. Unfortunately, that program has been halted, but there is some great technology into that. Another, you had asked about a, I guess, moment or important stories I think with Boeing since I covered it. And that was the tanker contract. That was a 10 year deal of kind of stops and starts where first Boeing was going to lease, I'm sorry, the Air Force was going to lease 767s modified into tankers from Boeing. Um, that senator McCain kind of questioned that and helped put a halt to that, there was some misdeeds going on, so that was kind of the first round of that. and then in the second round the Air Force, uh, awarded the contract to the partnership of Northrum Brummen using Airbus airplanes. And then that was thrown out, say that was, the contract wasn't done correctly. So they opened it up for a third round of bidding and Boeing won the contract this last time. So, um there has been a lot of coverage on those issues because it meant work for Wichita. Except the fact that Boeing announced in January that they are pulling out of Wichita, that work on the tanker that was to come here is going to go to the Puget Sound area in Seattle.

Kansas legislators worked hard on that.

They did. They worked hard for 10 years on it and they were pretty upset when Boeing said they were leaving because I think they felt like they were real advocates for Boeing and bringing that work to Wichita. And, it had only, it hadn't even been a year since we were celebrating that the work was coming to Wichita.

Do you remember the moment that you heard Boeing was closing? And will you sort of describe what you were doing and what was going through your head?

Um, gosh. You know, it is funny because if you would've, I will get to your, the answer, but if you would've said when I first took over the aviation beat that someday Boeing would not be in Wichita and we wouldn't have Boeing here that

would have been like, you couldn't even wrap your head around it. You couldn't even think about it. When I took over Boeing had over 21 thousand people working there. Um, and you know, when I heard Boeing was leaving it wasn't as big of a shock because things had progressed, another thing I probably should've mentioned, which is huge coverage is when Boeing spun off their commercial aircraft division here in Wichita which formed Spirit. That was a huge thing, and changed the complexion of Boeing in Wichita dramatically. Because their commercial business was so much bigger than what their military remained with Boeing in Wichita. In fact, after all that coverage with all the announcements some people really didn't even realize that Boeing was actually going to still be here at all. Even though the military side was, because it was the bigger side of the company by that time was commercial. So that was a lot of coverage, which went on probably way more than a year. Between the time that I heard that Boeing was even thinking about selling it to the time that the announcement that they actually sold and then to the talk that they closed the deal, um, and made the changes. So that was huge on a lot of people. And that meant that people who worked at Boeing had to reapply for their jobs at Spirit and the uh, company didn't hire everybody who was working in commercial. Not everybody went over to Spirit, so that was a huge change here. And it left Boeing, the Boeing side of things on the east side of Oliver a much smaller company. And they went through a huge transition, when you are a huge company and now you are a much smaller piece of that. That was a big transition because even things like utilities, they shared utilities, they shared computer systems and telephone systems, you know, all these layers and layers of things that had been integrated together. Now you have to divide that off. And Boeing also wanted to let people know that they were still there, but just a much smaller part of Wichita now actually. At the time Boeing announced in January that they were going to move out they had a little over 2100 people. Much smaller company, but a blow still to the town.

Would you mark that selling the commercial side to Spirit is the end of the rein of Boeing in Wichita?

You know, its funny. At the time I would have phone calls from people saying, well in a few years Boeing is not going to be here at all and you know I kind of looked on them as the naysayers, doom and gloom and it turned out they were right. Although they don't, its hard to know if it was just a feeling or what. And I think that was what, maybe more then it was but um, you know, it certainly changed the complexion of Boeing here. At with it leaving the military side um, with budget cuts in defense spending they said, you know, our programs are winding down, or some have finished, you know, been completed. And there is not that new work coming in behind it to take its place, to keep it going. And they have huge facilities, it's a lot of buildings and hangers and offices and they say that their overhead costs are just too high to make sense to keep it here. And that is a sad thing, but you know, when you spread those costs over 2100 people it makes them pretty expensive.

I want to go back to the moment you heard, I don't know if you sort of saw it coming before, most people, I think if anybody saw it coming it was probably you. Did you um, the man I interviewed early this week said he had heard from the news media, which very well could have been you, that is how he heard first, how did you hear first.

I, I, I heard some mumblings that that was a possibility and um, and you know, I head heard, you know some things and it just it just mad me sad to hear that they were moving entirely. Um in my heart because they had been here 85 years,, um, so that's a huge history. Somebody equated it to, this is what she said, its like grandma died, because it is such a piece of our history. In the 140 years that Wichita has been here Boeing has been here for 85 of them, so I think it is a blow to our psyche, if you will. And so, yeah, so it was sad. It was just a sad moment. You know, you know, its just hard I guess. Not that, not that they may have had good reasons for making the decision. Those things are you know, their balance sheets and all that are just beyond me and they were really eloquent in their reasons for making that decision.

Ok, this next question, honestly, I am not sure what it means. Did you ever get feedback from Boeing on your stories on the "Big B"? I am not sure what that means exactly. Is that just Boeing?

I think that may be Boeing.

I think we already talked about that then. I wasn't sure if Big B was something else.

No, you know, I think over the years I have had a lot of feedback from Boeing employees and non-Boeing employees about a variety of things. Decisions that they made, especially the sale, oh my gosh, I've probably had the most phone calls and emails in that absolutely hands down in that time. When people were very unsure of what was going to happen about their jobs and about the sale in general and about their jobs in particular because it kind of stretched on for a long time, was, was when was the announcement going to happen, who it was sold to and what was going to happen, So, there was kind of this question mark hanging over peoples heads for many months.

Did you ever have employees look to you for information like that? How were their internal communications, and from my interview, he heard from you. They weren't the first to hear news.

Yeah, well I think they tried to keep their employees informed first, but a lot of people say that they heard it from me first. And I did break the news on who was buying the commercial business.

Um, did you find Boeing employees wanted to talk to you?

Um, yes and no. during times of strikes and contract negotiations I think the employees in general wanted to talk, some of them not because it is also kind of a private thing on what their own reasons are for either supporting it or not supporting it. And, the other thing is, Boeing kind of has a filter where you call their public relations people and then they put you in touch with the correct people. People wanted to talk but I think they definitely wanted to go through the steps correctly um. So some people, a lot of people would talk to me but they didn't want what they said in the paper or they didn't want their names used. And then for stories and that I would rely on their PR people to find the correct people to talk to.

Did Boeing look out for Wichita?

Did Boeing look out for Wichita. They were a big supporter of Wichita. They um, gave tons of money, uh, to support things. Like, through their United Way and through um, drives that they would have. They definitely were a supporter of the community.

What other things did they do, that you can think of, to sort of contribute to the..?

Um, its been a while since I thought about that. they, I want to say, I think they supported the arts. And um, just a variety of... food drives. Um, you know, lots of.... The employees would get together and do a lot of things. The company would write checks. So they, they had a person, kind of a community relations person in fact that was, that was that persons job to be out there in the community supporting community events and I think making the, some kind of decisions on what do you support.

Did that fizzle out over the years, or was that sort of a constant thing?

You know it changed after the sale because they were much smaller. But they were still out there in the community. But on a different scale because they are, just the numbers aren't as big.

We sort of already talked about if you knew if the closure was coming, but how long ahead of time did you start to hear those rumblings? Days, weeks, months...

Um, not weeks or months, not real long before. I think they kept that pretty quiet and they also said they kind of didn't make a final decision until not long before they announced it. But I know that they had to have been thinking about it for a while.

Do you think they knew when all those legislators and people in Kansas were rooting for them and working for them to get that tanker contract? Did they know then?

Well they say it was a final moments decision and certainly the delegation says how did you not know because it was less than a year between the announcement that

um, Boeing got the contract for the tanker and that work was coming to Wichita and then the announcement of the sale that it really wasn't that long of a time. And their um, thinking was those kinds of things take time to research and study and come up with a plan on how you do it and all of that. it is hard to know what went on behind closed doors, but that is certainly the conversation on both sides.

You don't want to share your...

No, I don't.

With Boeing leaving do you think it will hurt the Wichita community? Or have they sort of gotten small enough...

Well like I said I think it hurts our psyche a lot, because back in the 1940s they were churning out um, B29s and B47s and they had over 40,000 people working here. We had a lot of Rosie the Riveters. You know, they built Planeview and Hilltop just to put in some temporary housing for people who are coming out the farms and coming in to work at the plant would have a place to stay. And, you know, that is such a huge part of our history and and, when they built those communities like Planeview they never expected them to be permanent housing. They built them and the expectation was that at some point they would tear those down and of course they have stayed and been part of the city. Um, so there is a you know, huge, you know, pride and and, of doing that. But it also um, you know, was a huge war effort um, so but now there is you know, a little over 2,000 people and for those 2,000 people, that's a lot of upheaval- what do you do? Some people have taken other jobs or will take other jobs in town. Some will move. Um, Boeing is offering positions to some of them to move to Oklahoma City- the engineers and the program managers and then to San Antonio for the maintenance part of that. I am told that as of right now that non of the mechanics have yet taken Boeing up on an offer to move to San Antonio. So they have a lot of transition going. I mean, my hairdresser is moving to Seattle because her husband was on temporary loan up there and his position is obviously going away here, so he has taken a permanent position in Seattle and she is moving next month. So you know, she is a friend and a hair dresser, so you know, it kind of effects all of us a little bit, and them especially them. It is a hard move to decide, what do you do. You know, some people have kids in high school and kids in school, and and some people who are going to Oklahoma City are going to commute, keep their families here and their kids in school and come back on the weekends because its not that far. You know, its..

Have you been surprised at the number of people who did or didn't take jobs with the company? Moving their families and stuff..

Well, I guess it is still kind of early because they said that, you know that, um, there is a transition until the end of next year before they move everything out. And, so we are this far into it, but I think it is too soon to call on what really is going to happen and they still are in the middle of working their way through program transitions to

Texas and that. so, I don't know. Certainly not everybody is going to move. Because they've got their roots here and they don't want to go. And then some people will because its their job, its their livelihood and that is what they know. It is hard, you know, because those are skilled people, they are, they have really, you know, this body of knowledge that is pretty amazing.

How do you think the Wichita community is going to remember Boeing? A year from now, at five or 10 or 15 years?

Well, it's a legacy. You know. I think we will still be remembered at that legacy and a piece of our history because there is certainly a lot of people who, like I did, grew up with someone who worked at Boeing, and I guess that will go away as generations going, but it is still, it was an important part of Wichita's aviation history and aviation history in general. And it helped us be the air capital of the world. Um, which we still are, but, you know, its still our history.

Do you think there is room for growth in the aviation industry here, or is our peak behind us?

Um, well Boeing building as many airliners as they can and Spirits growing, you know, and again it is cyclical. Right now Boeing has seven years of back orders for airliners, um, and suppliers are filling up with commercial work. Our general aviation business is still tough. People have yet to really come out and buy business jets at the same rate as they did before this last downturn and that's hurt the city and its hurt that industry. Which has, you know, we've had over 13,000 layoffs just in general aviation. And that has not come off yet.

Do you think it is going to shift to like a suppliers area rather than an aircraft company situation?

Well Spirit is now a supplier to Boeing and to Airbus and um, Golfstream and Sokorsky and you know, other people as well. So they really are the, the biggest supplier actually in the US of aero structures. So they really are um, a key supplier especially to Boeing and to Airbus, so we kind of already are doing that shift in in aerospace.

How, if at all really, your day to day job going to change and be after I guess January?

Well I still have a lot to cover in aviation in Wichita where there are all the suppliers, Spirit, Airbus has a large engineering center here. There is still Hawker and the, right now question mark over their chapter 11 bankruptcy and how they emerge from that and what kind of company they will be. Cessna, Learjet and the suppliers in the industry, so it is still important in Wichita. There is about 1 out of 11 people in the workforce in Wichita work in aviation or aerospace. So it is still a key part of our economy.

How did Boeing impact the residents of Wichita over the years? I know that is a really big question.

Yeah, well, its bought a lot of dinners, put clothes on peoples backs and hamburgers or macaroni or steaks on peoples tables and, you know, raised a lot of families.. so...

I guess that it is, unless there is something I didn't ask. I guess one thing I would ask, to maybe elaborate on the blow to the psyche idea, if you'd like to.

I guess I just mean that you know, its been such an intricate part of our city for 84, 85 years, that not having Boeing is a blow, I think, and it certainly is a blow for those jobs in Wichita, but more than that it is kind of a blow to us who Boeings always been here....

Why don't they want to stay?

Hahaha.

I think that is it unless there is something else you want to say.

No, I can't think of anything. I think you have done a good job of kind of covering that.