

Fletcher Powell interviewing Terry Rush on May 7th, 2013, in Terry's home in south Wichita.

Terry, let me start by having you say your name, and tell me what your occupation is now.

My name's Terry Rush, and right now I'm a manager of a mobile home park.

OK. Now, are you from Wichita, originally?

No.

Where are you from?

Henrietta, Oklahoma.

Henrietta, Oklahoma. And how long were you there?

18 years.

OK, and what happened after that?

I went into the service, the Air Force.

OK, and you were in the Air Force...

For three years, six months, 22 days.

Where did that take you?

Took me to England, to the Panama Canal zone, and uh, stationed in Fort Walton Beach, Florida most of that time. I was what they called TDY, temporary duty, we worked in a school and we were teaching people how to deliver their ordnance on the battlefield. So, at times we were in Vietnam for six weeks, then we'd come back home. So it was back and forth... Did that six times over a period of a year, then I was stationed in Fort Walton Beach, Florida, that was our home spot. Then I got out of the service, in Virginia for three years.

OK, and, so you got out of the service...

Well, from that point I did a lot of stuff. I... uh...

You don't have to go through ALL of it...

OK, good...

Maybe sort of just what led you this direction, to Wichita.

What led me this direction, to Wichita, was we were living in Colorado at the time, and, uh, the job that I was doing at the time, which was an industrial painting job, I was working for a company as a foreman and the job ended—her father, Mary's [Terry's wife] father lived in Wichita, so we came down here to sort of visit with him and just kind of ended up staying.

OK, and, so, let's say when you were growing up, and certainly when you came here, were you generally aware of the Boeing Company?

Not really till I got here. Although, that's not true, I knew about Spartan Aircraft in Tulsa and a lot of people that I have known personally came out of Spartan and went to work up here at one of the aircraft industries, and Boeing was one of them, of course.

What year was it that you started to work for Boeing?

In, um... 1989.

1989. And what year did you get to Wichita?

'86.

OK, so about three years later you went to work for Boeing. How did you get hooked up with them? Did you see a job opening and apply?

Yeah, it was—that was what happened. They had a job fair somewhere and I went to it and then it just, because of my Air Force experience it kind of led me into it a little bit.

Did you have any difficulty getting that job?

4:30

No, not really. I had enough of the skills that, uh—and I also had to go through a six-week training course, which, they taught you a lot of the skills, so yeah.

OK. What was your first job with them?

My first job was what they call an assembler. And that's basically just putting parts together for the aircrafts. Whichever one you're working on. There was several at the time, and I started off working on what they called the 757, worked in the wheel well section, then I went to the 767 and also worked in the wheel well section on that. And then they started a new aircraft, the 737-X, and I got on the very first one

of those, and through the rest of my career I worked on that particular airplane. I think I went from the first one to 2600 or something.

What does that mean?

Means 2600 units, 2600 airplanes came out of there that I worked on during that period.

When you first went in as an assembler, did you have specific experience with that from your being in the Air Force?

No.

So, was that just what was open?

Uh, yes, that was what was open, and then, for me, I went into it with a whole lot of other ideas of what I wanted to do when I got there, but I knew this was the opening to get into Boeing, so I went in as an assembler. Which is actually probably one of the lower positions, hired-in positions, and then you can work your way up in different areas.

You said you had a six-week training course, did you have any, uh, academic experience that would have led you this way earlier? What were you, did you do in college?

No, what I did in college was totally unrelated to this, this really just got down to being a good job that I knew about with good benefits, I had children at the time and it seemed like the right thing, right move to make, and it turned out to be the right move, as well.

Even though it was completely separate, what degree did you get from college? Or did you finish?

I never finished. I went seven years and... I have a lot of hours.

So, your job title then was assembler? Tell me just a little bit more about what your responsibilities were.

There are particular parts of the airplane that you build, you assemble off the unit, or we call it the jig, where the plane is actually all put together, at least our section. So I would build small parts and then we would assemble it onto the jig. So, it was—consisted of drilling, riveting, measuring, I mean there was a lot, it was technical because Boeing required you to do six times greater than what was required. So everything was done to a specification that was in minute detail. I mean, everything.

So you had to be six times better than the most stringent requirements.

Exactly.

Did you have to have periodic training as you went along through your years there?

Yes. Yes. Upgrade your skills, changes in the procedures or changes in the parts, for that matter. So, it was always an upgrading process as you went along.

And then how long were you at Boeing?

13 years, total.

So, until 2002?

Well, I had a couple breaks there, nobody gets through 20 in Boeing without a few years off. But I got 13 in, so... I got laid off in 2002, I think, yeah, 2002, and then we moved to Washington, DC and I got called back but I finally decided I'd had enough of the Boeing experience.

OK, well let's talk about the layoffs then. How many times were you laid off while you were there?

Three.

And do you remember around when each one happened?

The first one was after six years. Uh, the second one was—I was off for a year, the second one was about seven years, so I was right at the time—well, actually I only got laid off twice, then. So it was seven years I got laid off again, which would have been the 13.

So you were back for seven years after your first layoff—

Yes, after the first layoff.

And you were laid off for a year the first time.

At least a year, yeah.

And then the second time you just didn't go back.

I just didn't go back. And I would have been off about a year as well, but I decided not to do it.

So when you were off for that one year, were you completely out of work?

No, I did other things, I—at one point I had a, I drove a school bus, I had a paper route, morning paper route I delivered, just whatever I could to, you know—cause I knew I was going back because of, you know, it was just, layoffs out there are part of that life, so I knew it was going to end at some point.

You just knew it was a temporary—

Temporary deal, so that's the way I approached it. Yeah, I didn't—everybody told me, 'yeah, it'll be about a year, that's kinda how the cycle works,' and that's pretty much how it did work.

So that was just the sort of thing that everyone around you just kind of took in stride, it sounds like.

10:20

You knew that. You knew that when you went out there, um, very few people ever make it through in just a straight shot. Of course, there's a culture out there that, you know, that's very, um, nepotism. And, uh, so a lot of people that were family didn't get laid off. You—it was pretty evident that, you know, you were stepping into a culture that was well established and pretty firm in how it was dealt with. So you kind of knew if you were a little bit of an outsider to the group that you were probably gonna get laid off. But that was ok, after six years I enjoyed the year off doing something different, so, and then I came back and went right back to work and did what I was doing.

I wonder if that's more or less stressful, going in knowing that you're going to be laid off for a while, maybe a couple of times.

I don't think I went into it knowing that, but after I got there and found out how the culture worked, I did realize that, 'well, this is gonna be part of it.'

So did that worry you, as you went along, you know, maybe this is coming soon?

I would say in the beginning it worried me, but after about four or five years I was actually looking forward to it, because I knew it was coming at some point, so I just said, ok, I'll take a few, a year off and do something different and then come back. Because the benefits were so good and the money was good, so it was definitely something I wanted to continue doing at that point in time.

When you went back did you just kind of slip right back into where you were before or did you start something new?

No, actually, I slipped right back into what I did before. It was—well, that's not exactly true, that's when, sometime in that first six years I went from the 57, 67 to the 737, so when I came back I went right back into the 737 program.

So, what I thought you said was interesting, about the nepotism, and sort of like being outside of the family, is that a number of people that we've talked to have talked about Boeing being kind of like a family. But they've said that in a positive way. The way you've said it here makes it sound a little bit different. Tell me about that, being an outsider.

Well, the way I looked at it was that, I knew that, I could see that the, the lineage. There was a boss and his son was a foreman, and his son had two cousins and a brother that worked on the line. So you could see the hierarchy and how it worked and, so, you either chose to buy into that and work that to your advantage or you decided, 'I'm not gonna do that, I'm just gonna do my job and try to be good at it and let the chips fall where they may.' And so that's the attitude I took and a lot of other people took it as well. Yes, it was a family, there was no doubt about it. It just wasn't my family.

Did you ever have any run-ins with anybody because of that?

Uh, well, you know, I tried to stay out of trouble. But there were times that we would perceive—some of us that were on the outside—that those people received special treatment, and when it came time for layoffs, they based it on your job quality. So, your quality is rated, I mean you're rated all the time on it. So if I was looking at one guy's rating against my rating, I knew that my quality was superb and his wasn't as exactly the same, and it was quantitative, we knew what it was. But he got what they called retained, instead of laid off. So I always felt a little bit on the outside. But my whole idea was—working out there—I'm gonna do the best job I can do and I'll do it as fast as I can and stay out of trouble, and they'll pretty much just leave me alone to do it. Because they want quality work and they want somebody that'll do that. So I kinda set myself a little bit apart from how the process really worked. And I wasn't the only one, there was quite a few people that did that. But that was a decision I made. I just saw it—I just wasn't that type of person, to acquiesce to things that I didn't agree with.

You mentioned benefits and pay. Talk a little bit about the rewarding parts of the job, and if that's all there was then that's fine.

15:25

Well, um... I enjoyed building a product that I knew was safe, and precise, and quality meant everything. As a human being, the quality is important in all aspects of my life, and in the work environment it was extremely important. Because you did feel a sense that, you know, people depended on you to do a good job. So that part I did enjoy. The money was always good, but the overtime was horrendous, I mean, we were working, uh, I think in the 13 years I averaged 56 hours a week. So that was basically four 10s and two 8s. So you didn't have a whole lot of time. And my kids were growing up and they were in sports and activities and I was sort of taken away

from that because of the requirement, cause it was mandatory most of the time. I think, actually, at several periods, especially when the 737's program started, we were on for three months, seven 12s, and it was just mind-boggling trying to keep it together, to do a good job and keep quality up, and have a family life. The money was awesome, you know, the benefits were unsurpassed anywhere, so you just kinda—that's what I had to do, so I went ahead and did it.

On the other side of that are the frustrations, and you may have had many, but can you give me a general sense of what some of your, sort of, frustrations throughout your whole time there were?

Well, I think my main frustration was that I had—when I came to Boeing, I had been a general supervisor for this international painting company. So I had a lot of, uh, I had a lot of responsibility and people working for me. So I came in with some leadership skills that I could see weren't gonna transpire here, it just wasn't gonna happen. And that was frustrating, because I knew I could do more than what I was doing. But at the same time, again, it was the family life, the money that it brought, the benefits, I just kind of said, 'ok, this is what it is, I'll go ahead and do that.' I did have some opportunities to move into what, uh, Boeing was trying to implement at the time, some of these new Japanese management systems, the Deming management system was one of them, and that got me really excited and got a lot of people excited. Because what they were really trying to do was create a situation where we were self-managed. And to me that was like, 'whoa, that's exactly what I would like to do.'

So, like, the workers on the floor were self-managed?

Yes, yes. They created pods, and we would take our particular job—whoever's in the pod—we'd go through classes about this, we spent three, four, five months, meeting once a week to discuss how this would work. So we were—we had it down pretty good, to the point that we thought—and, and they had said as much, that we could be self-managed, control our quality, produce more than the regular line people, and manage ourselves completely. Well, for me that was like, wow, nirvana in the workplace, you know? Because I wanted to do that, I knew we could do it, and I knew the group that we were with were all buying into that philosophy that, uh, 'yeah, we can do this, we can produce a better product, cheaper, faster, and all of us—we don't need everybody watching over us, cause we'll all take responsibility for what we're doing.' So that was exciting.

Do you remember about what year that was?

19:33

Uh, that would've probably been... probably in the mid-90s. Yeah.

So you said that went on for three or four or five months?

Actually it went on for about a year. But we got to this position where we could actually do this. And it became threatening to a lot of the senior people. Especially management. Because we weren't gonna need them.

But whose idea was it in the first place?

Management. Very weird situation. I think the culture out there beat it down. I think Boeing, in general, had very good ideas about what this could do and were excited that some of us really bought into it and were doing it, but it was gonna destroy a lot of the culture out there and take away a lot of these people that were already entrenched in the hierarchy. Their jobs were gonna be meaning less and less, and they didn't go for it, they didn't like it. So they started creating a lot of obstacles for us and eventually they just stopped the program. And we were ready to implement, we were ready to roll.

You were ready to go with it.

Yes.

And then they just pulled the plug?

Pretty much. Pretty much. Just said, uh, 'I don't think we're gonna be able to do this right now.' And no one gave us a good answer one way or the other.

You said it kind of challenged the culture out there, do you mean that hierarchical culture?

Yes.

Ok, and so what kind of obstacles were they putting in your way before they just said, 'ok we're not going to do this'?

I think it was more intimidation, that we were stepping out of the established way of doing things, and it threatened people to the point that it might cost them their job, because we're gonna do it better, faster, with better quality, and we knew we didn't need to be managed. We didn't need inspectors because we would live up to the standards—we knew what they were, we could do it, and we would do it. We would kinda, in the pod, work together to make that happen and everybody was buying into that, so we were all ready to help each other. But it really took us away from the rest of the culture and made it appear that we were sort of elitists of a sort.

Were there only a small group of you doing this?

No, there were others. Each of the airplane systems that was being built, they were trying the same different things. And, of course, in some varying degree. Some of

them didn't work, cause people—you had to have everybody on the same page in the pod, and some of those programs didn't work because they weren't all together. But we were. We were excited about doing it because to us—I'd read Deming and I'd read their other systems and I thought, 'man, this is the way to manage people, this is something that could really change the work environment.' So I was totally excited about it, as well as the other people in the pod. So, yeah, we were ready to roll. And I guess we knew that we were gonna really shake it up. Because it was gonna happen, it was gonna happen fast, and we were gonna be good at it. And so we were thrilled. We thought, 'all right, let's do it!'

So what was that like for you when they said, 'oh, no, nevermind'?

23:15

Very deflating. Very deflating. And it just reiterated that this culture is so nepotistic in the sense that families and friends and all of this did not want change. Did not want it because it threatened them. And we saw that. So it was deflating. We thought, 'well, god, you put this together, you recruited us to do it, and then we did it well and now you're gonna pull the plug on us.' So, it was, it was deflating.

And then you pretty much had to go back to the way you were doing things.

Right. And from that point on I knew I was on the way out. I knew that, I could do this, I was hoping I could get my kids through high school and then I was done. I just—it lost, it lost any thought of a creative future for me there, it just... I went back to the line and I was doing what I always did. I did a good job, I did it fast and I kept people—they didn't bother me because I did a good job and I stayed busy. But it took the, kinda just took the stuffing out of us. All of us.

So, so there were, everyone else around you kind of just maybe checked out in the same way?

They did, they just went back to work. You know, really that's just the way we looked at it. 'OK, fine, I know my job, I can do it. I don't know why you wasted all this time and money trying to put this together and then when we really thought we had it together you decided it wasn't what you wanted, so ok.'

I'm thinking, so you said that was sometime in the mid-90s, so it sounds like maybe that was shortly before the merger with McDonnell Douglas?

Uh, yes.

And, so, how well do you remember that, when the merger happened?

Um, I don't think it really threatened us, because they all along had told us it was gonna be kind of a seamless transition and that McDonnell Douglas did the same

thing that we did. It would be more in the management realm that it would be different. And it proved out to be that. We saw no demonstrative change at our level.

Not in the day-to-day work, and not in the culture, either, of the business?

No, no. The culture seemed to be the same because the people in charge still were the same, nobody left when McDonnell Douglas came. So from the top to the bottom, the leaders were still the leaders.

Micala (Terry's daughter) told me something interesting, which was that she went to pick you up from work one time and as you were coming out, she saw a bunch of people running, sprinting through the parking lot to get to their cars. You may or may not remember this, but she said she got really nervous about what was happening, and you just came out and said 'well, that's every day, people just want to get out of here.'

Uh, traffic and—they're just trying to beat the traffic and, of course we spend a lot of our life in there so people were pretty excited to get out and get on with the other part of their life and... I didn't feel much that way, I just walked out normally, but, you know, a lot of people would be flying by me, people getting out.

Yeah, ok. That was just kind of a stunning visual in my head—

Well, it is if you were just standing outside and all of a sudden they came out the door, because they are running, and there are a lot of them.

In your time, those 13 years you were there, did you experience strikes?

Um, no, I don't think we ever did. If we did, it was very short-lived. I don't remember any big strikes.

That didn't ever really feel like anything that was likely to happen?

No, I do think, I do think it was likely at times because, uh—but it, the Boeing, the way Boeing had structured it for us you didn't sense that they were trying to take anything away from you. And even when McDonnell Douglas came in, they maintained pretty much the same packages that we had. As a matter of fact, until I left all our health care was free, all our benefits were free, and we were making 26, 27, 28 dollars an hour. So we were doing, you know, well at that level. I think it changed when Spirit came in and they cut everybody's pay by 20% or whatever they did, but I didn't feel that—if there was a strike during that period, it would have been, honestly it would have been people just wanting a couple weeks off. I didn't see any real crazy issues being addressed.

OK. So, when you left Boeing in 2002 what was your attitude, generally, toward the company and toward that job?

28:20

'Thank god I'm outta here.' I mean, I had had enough. And part of it was on what had happened during that management deal, and the other part was my kids were already out of high school and I just didn't feel like I had any reason to be there anymore, for that, from that perspective, so it was time to do something different.

And so, I don't know if you had friends who continued to work there during that time—

Yes.

Did you pick up any feelings from them about the direction the company was going, did you guys ever even talk about that?

Yes, we did. And a lot of them appreciated the job so much that they weren't gonna buck the system. And there were just—not handfuls, there was quite a few—but there... my type of attitude there wasn't that many, but we were a pretty cohesive group as far as our dismay about how it was being given to us, and so we were all looking forward to getting out and doing other things. Some of them wanted to get their 20 in so they could get full retirement. I knew that I would get some retirement cause I was vested so, uh, it was just time to get, for me to leave. I was pretty unhappy at that point, just—cause you do that kind of job over and over for years and you really do think that you can do something different, something more, something better, it kinda starts to wear on you after a while and you stars feeling a little lackluster about life in general. So it was time. It was time.

Did you have any personal reaction to when Boeing sold part to Spirit and then when they announced that they were completely leaving town?

Well, I was away at the time, but I did think back on, 'oh, wow.' It didn't make a lot of sense to me because they always told us they were profitable but I guess they weren't as profitable as they wanted to be. So when they sold it to Spirit and Spirit started cutting things, I thought, 'oh boy, this is not gonna set well.' But then I've talked to all of my friends that were still there and, you know, they were invested, they were—they wanted to get their retirements and they were gonna take whatever came down the pike. And the group that I was probably closer with were all going, 'well, that's the way it goes,' you know?

And, so, what about when Boeing announced relatively recently that they were pulling out altogether?

That was pretty shocking. I thought they were invested enough in this area to continue on. Yeah, that was, I never really got the reason in my mind for why they did that. But I'm positive it had something to do with money, of course. But it was shocking, because they had been here so long, and they had built so much here. And to watch them turn that over to a Canadian company just didn't make a whole lot of

sense from afar. There might have been clearer reasons if I'd have been here and could hear about it through the union and whatnot, but yeah, it was confusing. It was like, 'hmm, that's odd.'

So, do you have any speculation on the impact it'll have on the Wichita community with them being completely gone fairly soon?

Well, I think the overall view of Boeing being this very big company and very important company for our country was a pride in the community that I felt like really took a hit. Because, not that I have anything against Canadians, but it was a Canadian company that came in to take over for Boeing and it was like, you've lost, there's something lost in this translation here. And so I just felt a little sad for the community because I know how much pride people took that Boeing had done so much to build this community up. And then just took walk away from it seemed very odd.

Some people have talked about that pride that they took. Did you ever feel personally any kind of loyalty to Boeing?

33:08

In the beginning, yeah. In the beginning I did. Like I said, I was really proud that we were building such a—they demanded such a quality product. And that we could do that, we could build that. And when I walked away from that every day I knew that I built that—my part of that plane—to a precise measurement, to quality that was unmatched, because of the way they demanded it. And I liked that. I liked the fact that, 'man, they're gonna do this right, they're gonna build this thing right,' for all the reasons that you could think of, you know, not having it crash and all of those things that people would throw at us every once in a while about, 'you have a responsibility now.' But I bought into that. And it was really when I got into this new thing and got excited about it, that's when I sort of lost my feeling for loyalty to Boeing.

Sounds like that was a major turning point for you.

It was for me, it really was. And some of my friends that were in it, too. Just deflated us really bad. Because we really bought into it and were ready to roll with it, cause—and knew, knew we were gonna be good at it. So yeah, after that it was just 'do your job, go home, and first chance to get out of here, I'm gone.' And that's kinda the way it worked out.

Going back to the community at large—beyond pride, do you feel like Boeing made any particular contributions to Wichita?

Oh, I think, I think a lot. Uh, first of all, I think paying people a really livable wage with benefits took a lot of stress off people. Um, it kind of created an elitist attitude

in the community for people that didn't make that kind of money, or didn't have those kind of benefits, I felt some resentment about that at times. But, from my perspective, I was just thrilled to be able to have a livable wage. I had dreams that I could actually finance with what I made. I was a musician, buying musical equipment, playing in bands. It afforded me a little bit of a lifestyle that I really enjoyed. And, yet, I knew I had to go to work out there every day and put in my time, but the after hours were starting to pay off and so I was a pretty happy guy about that at the time.

So, Boeing's turning out their lights completely pretty soon here—what do you think their legacy might be for the city?

I think the legacy will be—it may be a dying bird, too—the legacy will be, in this town there is a place where you could go to work, you could still dream, you had money to do everything you needed to do, and you were building a quality product that was world-renowned, and, and that was a good thing. I mean, that was—that didn't happen everywhere. And, so, to be part of that was exciting, in the beginning of course, and it grew lackluster at the end, but it was exciting and I think for the community itself it really did give us a chance to see how things really could work. You know, people could be paid a livable wage and they still had money to dream and take their dreams to wherever they lead. That's not always true when you work for a wage that you barely make it. And that's kind of what's happening now in this country is that, you know, there's not jobs like this around anymore, and they're a dying breed. And, um, it's sad, because I think that it really built up a middle class here in this town that I think is sort of gone now. Or certainly fading.

So what do you think we look like, you pick how many years down the line, without Boeing?

Well, I don't know the pay structure at Spirit, I suspect they're still making pretty good money, I know they have to pay a lot for their benefits now. I think it's going like the rest of the country's going, it's just, it's going to a place where—I hate to get into this part, but, just where the haves and the have-nots are getting farther and farther apart. So the middle class has really suffered in the last few years and I think it's gonna continue to suffer until, uh, until the middle class decides they've had enough and demand more. But, uh, I think it'll go downhill, I think it's—I just see the whole country headed that way and I think Wichita's just part of it. So I guess I'm a little pessimistic.