

STATE HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF MISSOURI-ST. LOUIS

INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S FORUM ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

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RHONDA HAMM-NIEBRUEGGE INTERVIEWED BY BLANCHE TOUHILL

Blanche Touhill: I'd like you to introduce yourself and talk about your early childhood and where you were born and your mother and father and siblings or when you went to school, what did you like to do and was there a teacher that really inspired you or a neighbor. How did you get started in life?

Rhonda Hamm-Niebruegge: Well, I grew up in Missouri in a very small town in the boot heel, a town of about 1,200 individuals so a little town called Oran. We lived on a farm. My father's dad had been a farmer and my dad was a farmer part-time and also worked for the government part-time, so I was the three of four children, so I was number three. So I had all brothers and the two older brothers and I were very, very close in age and then there was a three-year spread between my youngest brother. So childhood was fun and it was entertaining because with all brothers, living on a farm, you learn to hunt and fish and do all the things that they liked to do because they were your partners every day. So it was a good, fun childhood growing up, it really was. Mom and Dad were great. Mom was a stay-home mom. She always worked at the school during the school year, either in the kitchen or helping out with various programs; grew up in a Catholic school for the grade school so I went to Guardian Angel. So a town of 1,200, probably 900 were Catholic so there was a fairly large Catholic population in the town and went to the Catholic grade school and then did go to the public high school. We did not have a Catholic high school in our town. So the nearest would have been Cape Girardeau going to Notre Dame and we opted to stay and not make that drive every day and the burden on Mom and Dad. So we all went to

the public high school. And so I will say, as a child growing up, I had probably the best of both worlds because I got to love the outdoors, learn about farming, learn about a close-knit family and we were a very close-knit family. On the other side, it also was a small town and so probably from early on, I always wanted to see and do more. I always thought it would be fun to see the world and to do a lot of different things and so as I got more probably toward my high school years, I really started thinking about leaving and what career I wanted. I knew that my brothers were all going to stay around there and they did, all kind of in different categories of professions but they all knew that that's where they wanted to stay. I, on the other hand, knew by the time I was in high school, that it wasn't where I wanted to stay. So, in high school, started thinking about what I wanted. I was very athletic because I competed against my brothers every day so I always had that athletic side so I did play volleyball in high school and that sort of took me on a lot of trips because we had some tournaments and we did some camps out of state and sort of brought that urge more to see more of the world and see what was out there. I did have a volleyball coach who was very good for me in terms of, not only pushing me to excel at what I could do physically in the sport, but looking more academically and career-wise: "What would you like to do because you have talent." So, by the time I was probably a sophomore in high school, I really started thinking about the CIA and thought that's where I would go and what would be my best opportunity to get involved with the CIA because I knew I would probably never have an opportunity to see other countries if I stayed where I was or stayed with the family because we never traveled internationally. It was always a vacation to Florida or maybe to one of the national parks. So I started thinking, I really would like to go abroad and see abroad and if I studied foreign languages in college, then maybe I could do an exchange program and if I really got good at a language, then that might help my chances if I went into a

CIA career. So that's what I set my goals on and I had this volleyball coach of mine who used to always like to tell me that I was a little too strong-minded sometimes and opinionated and so he would always try to debate with me on different things and we had...it was my junior year and we had a class, a PE class which, by all standards, I should have aced. I was a straight A student so I was competitive on that side and that was a small school so I had 59, I think, in my class. So it was not a large high school but to me, grades were important and I was always competitive and I always had straight A's, never had a B and was determined I would graduate at the top of the class with this 4.0. So I had a PE class which should have been a cake walk for me and at the end of the semester, during Christmas break, we got the grades and I had a B in a PE class and he was my PE coach as well as the volleyball coach and I said, "A B, I'm not going to wait until we go back to school," so I called him and I said, "I'd like to talk to you," and he said, "What about?" and I said, "My class," I said, "I got a B" and I said, "Clearly your mistaken. Was it somebody else's report card?" and he said, "You know what? We'll talk when the semester starts again." So, for a couple of weeks, I had to seethe over this B and trying to figure out what was wrong and in my mind, it was a mistake; it had to be. So we went back, the first day, bright and early and in his classroom and said, "Okay, Coach, what's the B? I mean, what's up with this?" and he said, "Sit down," and he said, "You know, of all the people in this class," he said, "I told you at the beginning there were three things that we were going to learn in this class and it wasn't just about building your athletic skills." He said, "I told you it was going to be bettering yourself physically; it was going to be mentoring each other and making sure that if you had skills others didn't that you would help teach them and you would make them better," and he said, "I told you we were going to be leaders. We were going to learn how to be leaders" and he said, "I think all those things are important if you really have a sports-

oriented career” and he said, “Of all the people in the class, you could have been the one who could have breezed through all three” and he said, “You did none of them.” He said, “You did not play as a team” and he said, “You did not help your...”...he said, “You’re the star of the team” and he said, “We won the games because of you but you did not teach the others,” and he said, “Too,” he said, “you didn’t mentor. You know, a lot of the girls looked up to you.” He said, “A lot of them thought, ‘wow, I wish I could be that athletic’” and he said, “You’re the type of person that has the ability to mentor people and you didn’t do that,” and he said, “You know, I look at how strong you are and how smart you are” and he said, “You could do anything and you chose not to lead. You chose to take the easy way out, just play your sports every day and do it well but you didn’t do anything else that I wanted this class to learn,” and he said, “The B stands.” I walked away livid, first upset, but livid and then, as time went on, I thought, okay, I can take this one way or I can take it another and I talked to my mom and dad. I was really close to both of them...still am...and my mom looked at me, my dad’s, “I don’t think that’s right,” and my mom said, “You need to think about that. You’re the one who wants to go bigger places and do bigger things and you need to think about that.” So, by the end of the school year...it took me that long to sort of get over it, but I learned a lot from that and I learned that I can take that advice and change the person that I was. So I made an intent then to say, I’m going to be a different person. If I’ve got the capability and I’ve got the skills, then I need to use them and I need to teach them and I think I became a much better person. So he was a great inspiration to me. I still don’t like my B, still have my report card but graduated with highest honors and the valedictorian but still, with a B. But it taught me a great, great lesson about who I was and who I wasn’t. So that’s sort of the high school, made me even think further, that I wanted to pursue a career where I had to work hard and do something. So chose to stay in the university

system in Missouri and went to Mizzou so in 1978, graduated in my class and had a nice scholarship at the time to go to Mizzou and went there and studied German, walked in, had...even though my background, my family has a German heritage, did not speak German, knew very few words of it but it was determined that I would learn German and that would be a good opportunity for me to have another secondary language. We didn't even in our high school offer languages at the time. So walked into Mizzou and started taking the classes and really fell in love with the German and the whole history and the background. Then my junior year, started looking at the opportunity study abroad which was a goal that I had always wanted to do and so was able to do that and studied at the Goethe Institute in Freiburg, Germany, which was wonderful and really felt at the time, once I was over there, that I would love to do an international opportunity and it would be great to spend a number of years internationally and really had a hard time when that semester was up, coming back because I enjoyed it so much but I did come back, mostly because my mother said she would never forgive me if I didn't come home. So I came back, graduated in December in 1982 and had started interviewing three months maybe before graduation with the CIA. So I actually did pursue that, started to interview, was naïve and didn't realize at the time that that may be a year-long process or a year-and-a-half long process. So I started interviewing. May was rolling around, graduation was near and I was not going back home and was not going to go somewhere without a job and Ozark Airlines had a job fair on the campus and they were opening La Guardia Airport in New York and were looking to hire some sort of management people on the front line, learning the basic skills and so I walked up to a booth of theirs and interviewed and got the job, left shortly thereafter and started in New York at La Guardia Airport as a customer service agent in training learning sort of the ropes in all the different facets of the job and

fell in love with that and thought, okay, well, I'll work here. I'll continue to maybe pick up a few classes if I can to further the education. I'll continue the interviewing process and after about three months, just thought, this could be a career. I love the airlines and this could be a great career and forgot about the CIA, never went past another interview, never took up another interview with them and then stayed in the airline business and just fell in love with it.

Blanche Touhill:

So how did you fall in love with it?

Rhonda Hamm-Niebruegge:

You know, I think, Blanche, it was at La Guardia so it was a neat airport and it wasn't the large international airport like JFK but we had a lot of international people in that airport and every day was different and to me, the challenge of learning...there's never a calm day in an airport so if there is, there's something wrong. So it was that constant, every day being faced with these challenges, one different, one bigger than the next and how do you deal with that? And it was like a puzzle to me. It was like putting together a puzzle and the more hectic and complex it could be, the more I fell in love with being able to do it. You can sit out at night, because we sat on Flushing Bay and so we would sit out at night and watch the planes come in on the dark, right across the river and then you could look down and see the skyline and it was just fascinating. I mean, the industry just fascinated me and something I really wasn't interested in became a love for me and I thought, this is where I can grow my career. I can better myself and grow my career.

Blanche Touhill:

Did you use your language skills?

Rhonda Hamm-Niebruegge:

I did not. It's interesting because I worked so hard. I went with so little knowledge of languages and I also studied French and Spanish although they weren't majors, they were minors for me, and I thought this would be great and became very, very fluent in Spanish and very fluent in German at the time and once I started that, I had an

opportunity to use my Spanish probably a little bit more in New York, really very rarely had an opportunity to use the German and did not keep up with it. Today, I look back and I say, oh, I wish I had stayed because if I want to converse, I have to stop and think. If I spend a couple of weeks in Europe, it will come back and I can pick up a little quicker but just to have a conversation sitting here, I've lost so much of it because, for 29 years now, I haven't used it.

Blanche Touhill:

So you stayed in New York for a while. Where did you go then?

Rhonda Hamm-Niebruegge:

Well, Ozark merged into TWA in 1986 and TWA was headquartered in New York and I had moved up fairly quickly with Ozark, even in that short tenure that I was there, between '82 and '86. I had become a manager so I had moved up and it was a much smaller company. It was a company of 8,000 people and it was a very close-knit company, great leadership there. I met some wonderful bosses who taught me a lot of things and we began merging with TWA, it was announced early in '86 and the merger actually took place October of '86. So, after being there for a little while, realizing that it's a larger company, there's a lot more opportunities here, there's international traffic, they had international flights where Ozark didn't and I thought this would be another good opportunity and I debated whether I wanted...because I was offered a job with TWA but it was a lesser job and at the time, I remember being called in by one of the vice presidents in saying, "We'd like to interview you," and I thought, well, this is great. Then I've got my job. So after a few days, I got a call from him and he said, "We think you'd be a great asset to come to us at TWA," so he said, "but we're going to bring you in at a supervisory level," and I was 26 at the time and I had worked really well...it was another one of those hard pills to swallow and I said, "Well, why?" and he said, "Because we're a different company. We're a bigger company. We're an international company. We're a more complex company. I like what I see but I don't think we're

ready to bring you in as a manager” and he said, “If you are who I think you are, you’ll move up quickly” and so that was another one of those turning points in my career...in my life, really, at the time, that said, do I want to do this? I’ve worked so hard and now I’m taking this step back and do I want to do this. My husband today, we were engaged at the time and he was living in Missouri so we had this long distance relationship and we had thought about, okay, how are we going to merge ourselves together physically, how are we going to get back to the same place if we’re going to get married? And so I had thought about coming back to St. Louis. I thought, well, this would be a good time to come back to St. Louis. Then, as the merger took place and I did take the supervisor role and I stayed there, it became clear that St. Louis was going to be the growing spot for TWA and so I said to my husband, “It’s the opportunity to come back to St. Louis and stay with the airlines and really grow.” So I came back here in the late ‘80s then with TWA.

Blanche Touhill:

Did you work in the main corporate office?

Rhonda Hamm-Niebruegge:

I worked at the airport for many years. I worked as a manager on the ramp and then I run passenger services and then they asked me to run the eastern region so I had about 30 airports in the eastern region that I ran and I eventually...and I think it was in 1991, started running the hub here for TWA. So I ran the hub for several years and then I became their Vice President for North American Operations and that was down at headquarters at (1CC?) at the time. It was fascinating, and again, it was interesting because that first time I had to make that transition of saying, do I want to take a step back in my career? That came to me two more times in my career. When I was the Vice President for North American Operations at TWA, had worked my way up, had a wonderful...I replaced the gentleman who had been the vice president for many years and he had sort of said, “I’m going to groom you. I think you’d make a great replacement” and life worked

that way and then in 2001, when we went into our third bankruptcy and American decided to buy us, I was an officer and they offered a job and it was in Texas.

Blanche Touhill:

And so you went?

Rhonda Hamm-Niebruegge:

I did not go. We had three children, all were still at home at the time with my husband and no one wanted to go to Texas and so I said to them, "I just can't move to Texas" and they said, "Well, the officer jobs are in Texas," and I said, "Well, I'll have to leave and figure out what I can do in St. Louis," and they came back to me and they said, "We really don't want you to leave. Do you want to go back to running the hub in St. Louis?" and I knew it was a lesser capacity, I knew it was something I had done, and I said, "I think so. That would work for me." So I came back to run the hub here in St. Louis. They were great, American was, in that they gave me a lot of extracurricular things that I could do and contribute to. I did that, got very involved with the business community because in my prior life, I was always on the road and responsible for 100 airports in North America so I really was traveling a lot. The family was here and I had my weekends but I was always on the road and I really didn't get involved with knowing the business community. So that seven years gave me a chance to be on the chamber board; it gave me a chance to get involved with Civic Progress; it gave me...and I met a lot of the leaders in the community which I had not had a chance to do. So, when it came in 2009, and we really took away the hub, they said, "Okay, Rhonda, we can't keep you in St. Louis," and I didn't want to go back to running something less than the hub and so I had to make another decision in life and said, "Do we want to move to Texas and to keep an officer's role or is it time to move on?" and I made the choice to retire and move on.

Blanche Touhill:

Well then, how did you end up running the airport?

Rhonda Hamm-Niebruegge:

Well, it was June of '09 and I had talked to the executives at American. I said, "Look..."...I knew that that last

downsizing was coming and I said, "I'm going to have to retire." I was fortunate because I was just at 50 and I had 27 years of service. So I said, "I think I need to retire. At the end of the year I'll make the transition. I'll get the city set up to where it's operating as a focus city, not a hub," but I said, "That's going to be the end, I think" and they said, "Don't you want to think about Texas?" and I said, "I don't." Two kids had moved on to college at the time. One was still home. My husband didn't want to and I really...I mean, I spent a lot of time in Texas in those seven years and it just wasn't where we wanted to move and be and I didn't want to be a commuting life forever. So I said to them, I said, "You know, it's been a wonderful career but I think I'm just going to decide what else to do." So American was great about saying, "Okay, that's fine. We'd love you to stay until the end of the year" and they did. So then I started talking to some of the business leaders in town and said, "I'm going to leave..."...because they said, "What are you going to do? The hub is going away" and I said, "Well, I'll retire at the end of the year" and they said, "Well, then what?" I said, "You know, I don't know. I'm going to start thinking" and about two months...maybe even six weeks after I had made that announcement within a business community, I received a call from the mayor of St. Louis and Mayor Slay said, "You know, maybe we should sit down and chat" and I knew what it was about because, in my mind at some point, I thought, boy, what a great opportunity if the director ever left Lambert, I could maybe look at that and so sat down and talked with the mayor and we started talking about what I saw was the challenges for the airport, having spent so many years at it in a different life and capacity and what he was looking for, what he felt the community was looking for. It had been some tough challenges with all the changes. So we spent, I don't know how many times, talking and discussing it and then he said, "I'd like to vet you through a few people. I'd like you to talk to a few leaders in town, talk to some of the union labor. I would like to see how

they would fit with you in this role and what their thoughts would be.” So I did that for probably three months and met with a lot of different people in town who the mayor had respected opinions of and leaders who had an interest in seeing the airport become a better place. So I guess at the end of that, they all said okay because in October, the mayor said, “You know, I’d love to have you run the airport” and I said, “I think I’d love to do that.” So it was announced in October of ’09 and then when I retired in December from American, I started January 3rd so I retired on December 31st from one life and then started January 3rd so it will be my fourth year this upcoming January.

Blanche Touhill:

You had the career background to take the job.

Rhonda Hamm-Niebruegge:

I did and again, I never thought that that was a path that I would ever look at and one of the many, many things I learned in this was the vice president at TWA who I placed who was so good at grooming me for so many years but he said, “Never turn a path away because you don’t know if it’s right or wrong. Always keep those doors open and always look.” When I decided that the career wasn’t as important as the move, we just didn’t want to move so I figured I could do another career path and I would just have to find that way and it’s funny how this one, just time-wise, was there and it was perfect because Mr. Ratco was leaving from the airport so it was a perfect timing and it did just fit in but I can tell you, up until probably a year before that, when I really started thinking about what might I do after I leave the airlines, that was the first time it had crossed my mind that, oh, my gosh, I’d love to run an airport and to be able to run the one in which I spent so many years working in a town that, to me, was where we want to live was just a great opportunity.

Blanche Touhill:

When you moved in, was it easier for you because you knew so many people or was that harder?

Rhonda Hamm-Niebruegge:

You know, it was both because what it did do, Blanche, was it gave the community a trust. I went out, I told the

mayor, one of the things I felt most important was missing is that the airport wasn't communicating with the community. A lot had happened. People didn't understand it and I'm not sure people had heard from the prior regime about what are these changes; what do they mean; what happened; what can we do? Based on the career that I had had, I was always out in the public and I was always having to speak because every time I would open a new airport or close one or downsize one or move an operation, I always got involved with speaking to those business communities because I felt that was important. They needed to understand why our decisions were. So when the mayor and I talked, I said one of the things that I thought would be most important was to sort of do these road shows with the community, help them to understand. So, there was a lot of push-back and the people that I knew didn't want to tell me what they didn't like about the airport because we had become friends. On the other hand, I said, "I need the feedback and input" and, because I could stand up, I think, and talk to a lot of groups and I did, whether they were groups of five or groups of five hundred, I spoke to a lot of organizations that first year-and-a-half in town and could answer questions because of my background, about not only the airline industry, but how are we going to compete in the next decade, in the next two decades and what's the goal and what's forthcoming and I had a good knowledge of how I thought airlines were trending and what would happen and why we probably, in the size of a city, we're not going to be a single carrier hub again. We really needed to diversify the airport and broaden it. So when I spoke to people and they asked questions, I'm not shy, the answers came out and they knew that I was not trying to B.S. my way through the answers or not answer their questions and so I think that piece built up a good faith and it built up a good, I guess, trust factor within the community that says, "Look, I've known Rhonda for a while and I think she's right and she does know her business." I was never scared to get up and address the

concerns or to say the things I thought that needed to be said and I think that played in my favor. On the other hand, when you know people, you also never want to say anything that you think might offend them. You tend to be a little bit more reserved. So balancing that was a little challenging because relationships that I had known for a while that I had built up who disagreed with maybe some of my thoughts about the airport, telling them, "I don't agree with you and here's why" wasn't so easy. It would have been much easier telling a stranger that. Telling a friend that is harder. So I think that balance, weighed both good and bad. Now I think, almost four years into it, it's gotten much, much easier because people have seen some of the progress and even though we're still not where we necessarily want to be, people can see that things are moving in the right direction and they can see some of the planning and how some of the look as played out and what it's meant, and quite honestly, after the tornado...

Blanche Touhill:

We'll talk about this...

Rhonda Hamm-Niebruegge:

Okay, I'll wait.

Blanche Touhill:

Because the tornado, I think you came really into the public view, into other than the business community. You just came forth and you did such a splendid job that I think everybody was just so delighted you were in charge. So talk about...

Rhonda Hamm-Niebruegge:

Well, you know...

Blanche Touhill:

Because it was a decisive moment in your career.

Rhonda Hamm-Niebruegge:

It was and I've had a couple of other of those and I am a firm believer that the public needs to know the truth and the more up front and organized you are, the better off you'll be. So when the tornado hit that night and I was at the airport within about 20 minutes, had called the team together and they had gotten used to me. I had been there a little over a year; it had been about 13 months, and so they were used to my sort of fast-paced, constantly asking

questions, constantly asking for documentation and backup and why. So they knew that if they were going to give me something, I would dig deeper if I didn't have all the answers. That played pretty well into that evening because when we got there and saw the devastation, I said, "The mayor's going to be here in probably the next 45 minutes and the county executive as well. We have to give them a briefing of where we're at. We just lost a major asset in this community and the major artery for people coming in and out. So we have to be able to tell them where we stand and where we're at." To me, that was my nature. It wasn't, "Oh, what do we do?" I've always been sort of an organized planned person and I give my brothers credit for that because they fought me on everything and I could always strategize better than them. So, the team knew, they said, "How much time?" and I said, "I need to brief them in the next 45 minutes so go out and tell me each of your departments, where you're at, what's wrong" and so when the mayor and the county executive got there, I think everybody expected to see a little bit of chaos and, quite honestly, we had already, by that point...the EMT station had been set up. We'd already done the search throughout the airport. We had validated there were no casualties; there were no serious injuries. We had a good handle on where the damage was. We knew the power that had been lost. We knew that we couldn't pump fuel. We had a good feel and so, as I'm going through these lists with the mayor, I think they were surprised a little bit at just how much we already had pulled together and knew and were thinking, okay, here's where we go tomorrow. So, I remember chatting with the mayor and he and I have a really good relationship and I said, "Well, we need to do a press conference here real quick because we need to tell the public what's going on" and he said, "Well, let's make sure we know what's going on." I said, "I do, I do know what's going on. I'm going to tell you right now and then we're going to tell the public." We had some debates over that

press conference, that first one and the tornado hit at 8:12 and our press conference was at 10:00 o'clock and so I said to them, I said, "You know, we've got to lay out the plan, what has happened, where we're at now, what the possibilities are and go on" and I said, "and then we should do them every couple of hours and update ourselves and update the community on where we're at." That was a little bit of a push, I think, for the mayor, not in a negative way but always...from his standpoint, you don't want to over promise and from my standpoint, I said, "Look, my team knows me and they know that they won't tell me something they can do if they won't do it so if they tell me they can do it, we will get it done." So we had that press conference at 10:00. I still have people to this day come up and say, "When you came on, we felt like, 'Okay, we're getting answers here.'"

Blanche Touhill:

So they really believed you?

Rhonda Hamm-Niebruegge:

They did.

Blanche Touhill:

They said, "Oh, she says it's going to open again..."...I don't remember the details. What did you tell the public?

Rhonda Hamm-Niebruegge:

In that press conference, first we obviously talked about life safety and the fact that we had not lost any lives and no serious injuries but there were five people transported. So that was our first point: "Here's where we're at..."...from a human standpoint because that's the most important. Beyond that, "We've got the air field damage; we have a hole in the air field which means it's unsecure. We have notified Washington the airport is closed until further notice. We had all the windows blown out. We have the power down. We have two sub-stations, both are affected right now," so just sort of programmatically went through the challenges we were facing and said, "Our goal is to work through the night to see..."...we already had called crews in to start helping us clean up the place, clean up all the debris. It was continuing to rain, make sure that we could get boards on the windows, so reassured them,

“Look, we’ve already outreached to a lot of corporations and a lot of our partners out here. People are coming to help us. We’ve got lots of crews working, cleaning up and we’re going to do that through the night and then tomorrow morning, once we have a better handle, at daylight, on the power issues and the opportunity to see, can we secure the air field, then we’ll know more.” So we had said at 10:00 o’clock, “We will do a press conference at 8:00 o’clock tomorrow morning to update you.” So, the mayor and myself and the county executive, I said, “If you can come in at 7:00, we’ll tell you where we’re at at 7:00. Go home, get some rest and we’ll tell you where we’re at.” So I met with our team then at 6:00 to say where are we at, and we met with the airlines at 6:30 because we knew the C concourse could not be reopened and we knew we had four carriers there so I said, “We need to meet. We need to determine how we’re going to open you guys up on different concourses and then at 7:00 we brief the mayor and the county executive.” I remember telling the mayor, “We’re going to open the air field today,” and he sort of looked at me and John Nations was in the room as well and they all went, “Yeah.” I said, “We’re going to open it if we can get the power back on and if we can test our underground fuel lines, then we believe we’ll be able to open the air field tonight, for arrivals,” not departures because we still had too much work in the terminal but for arrivals coming in and for cargo aircraft, and they said, “Well, you are not going to say that,” and I said, “Well, that’s our goal. I mean, we’re going to open the air field by noon. We have secured the hole so it’s going to take us about four hours to sweep the air field” but the air field itself, other than the perimeter hole in the fence, wasn’t damaged so I said, “The hole has been secured so now it’s the sweeping process and that will be done by noon and I would like to tell the FAA, Washington, we’re ready to reopen the air field. So cargo flights because they don’t have to come to the terminal, can land, and that will put faith back in the ability of the airport.” We had a lot of

discussions before that 8:00 o'clock and called our press conference that morning, and so I told them, I said, "The plan is to reopen the air field at noon and if we are able to get the power on..."...and I had Tom Voss with Ameren standing right there beside me and said, "If Ameren can get the power on, which gives us the ability to test the systems, both the computer systems and the underground fuel pipelines, then we can receive flights tonight. We won't be able to depart because we're still working on getting the front of the terminal restored to an operating standpoint but we can operate tonight with arrivals and tomorrow morning I think we can operate at a 70%," and we had determined that 70% because Terminal Two where Southwest operates, really was not impacted. The power had already come back on Saturday morning there. They had a separate sub-station. A concourse...and they were, like, 48% of the traffic, so then we had 52% of the traffic to look at down here in Terminal One. The A concourse had some heating and cooling issues, had a few windows blown out but we knew everything else was fine. So we looked at the operation on the C concourse and it was about 30% of the total airport. So we knew that those airlines could not be up and running on Sunday. So that's how we set that goal of 70%. We thought we could get them relocated mostly by Monday, putting us at 90% and then Tuesday, we'd be 100 and that's the story we told and I think people though, "Whoa," you know?

Blanche Touhill:

Honestly, I think people believed you.

Rhonda Hamm-Niebruegge:

And we did.

Blanche Touhill:

And you did it?

Rhonda Hamm-Niebruegge:

Yeah, and we did, so that, I think, for me, was a turning point too, with the community's faith in how I run the airport, how we run the operation, how we look at it, it's such an important part of this community and it is a part of this community. It's not just a public utility. It is part of this community. So I think that that gave me a lot of

credence with the community and that helped accelerate, I think, people's belief in "Let's let her do her job."

Blanche Touhill:

Well, I think it also convinced the community that you could lead the airport in the future and that we were not going to go back to being the international center that we were. So talk about what you decided was the future of the airport.

Rhonda Hamm-Niebruegge:

Well, I think the best is for people to understand that the airlines have changed their patterns and mainly due to low cost carriers like Southwest coming in who have a whole different mindset and are not an international carrier; they are a domestic carrier. They're now the largest domestic carrier, far bigger than anybody else domestically. So what you have to look at is and say, what does that mean for the next decade of aviation and the reality is, for U.S. carriers, they're going to keep those hubs in those large, concentrated populated areas because they need that number of people every day to supply large airplanes and to supply the type of passenger traffic you're looking for. It's harder for a community this size. That being said, we can grow and it's just understanding the network and it's understanding the trends of a business community here. So, what the goal was to say, first of all, let's diverse...we had seven airlines in 1999, all the way up until 2008, we had seven airlines. One of those had 78% of the traffic, obviously TWA and eventually American. So we were not diversified. So when the shoe dropped and we lost so much of the airline traffic from one particular carrier, we were scrambling and other carriers didn't know St. Louis. I mean, Delta, United, U.S. Air was here but a lot of other carriers didn't know St. Louis so they really scrambled...that was before my time...to say, "Okay, how do we fill some of these routes? We know that these are good routes. We know that people will pick them up," but they had to really start from nothing, to try to figure out, how do we do it? So when I came on board in '10, they had started that process and they had reached out and

clearly Southwest had picked up the ball and said, "There's some good markets here. We can serve those markets," so they had done a lot of it. What I said we needed to do was to take a really, really close look at traffic and buy the network that could tell us where our passengers are going every day and what the traffic means or where's their end and how are they getting there? Are they making trips internationally? Are they making trips domestically and how many stops are they going to get there? What's their start and their end game? So we logged on and bought on into programs that allowed us to pull that data and that was crucial because it gave us a business plan and we could see how many people we have in those markets that were really strong yet we didn't have non-stop service to. Then we started going to other airlines and looking at, where are they located. The best example was Seattle, when we lost Seattle which was a critical market for Boeing out of here and a critical market for this community and when American said, "We're pulling out of Seattle," we really thought, oh, my gosh, and then we looked at the Seattle market and said, "Who's the strongest player in the Seattle market?" and it's Alaska. Well, Alaska had never operated here, barely knew who we were practically and so we went knocking on their door and asked for a visit, went to their corporate headquarters. My passenger development guy made the presentation, talking about, "These are how many passengers we have. It's a business passenger. There's high yield on that ticket. We need you to come. We think with your hub being here, it's a great fit" and they came. So that's how we looked, we looked at each individual market and we looked at what would be the airline best suited to serve that where we could sustain it, and if that meant a carrier that wasn't here, "Well, let's go after a new carrier." So we did that and our pie went from seven airlines to fourteen by 2011 and then in 2011, Delta/Northwest merged and Continental and United merged shortly thereafter. Then you had the Air

Trans/Southwest merger and with all three of those...we lost three carriers but we actually grew our traffic, and again, I think it showed the plan that says you have a more diverse...at this size of a city...if you have a more diverse base of airlines, you can cater to each one of them to try and get more non-stop markets based on their network and what they have. So that's what we're doing. We're trying to do that and that's been successful. I mean, in our heyday we had about 105 markets we served out of here and we're back to 66 and I think we've got some other ones that we're getting close to so we're back to 265 flights a day. We were at 500. So it's trying to just make sure that you look at it from what's going to be good not only for the airport and for the community, but what can an airline survive and still have a profitable route because they're only going to put routes in that are profitable and their margins are so slim that you really have to look and say, how can they sustain a route? They don't want to put a route in that may or may not work. So you look at a longer term game plan and we put some incentive packages together to test the market, to allow them to come in for two years and grow that market, get the community, get the service built and get the passenger flow with it and we would help them during those two years. That has proved to be beneficial as well. We have not lost one market yet outside that two years so they've all stayed.

Blanche Touhill:

Well, let me ask: Are you the only woman who runs an airport in the country?

Rhonda Hamm-Niebruegge:

No, no, no, and surprisingly, there's probably 15 that are run by women in the country but the amazing thing is, some of the very largest airports are run by women. So Los Angeles is run by a woman; Chicago is run by a woman; New York, the Port Authority runs as a three airport, so you've got Newark, JFK and La Guardia and the head of that Port Authority is a woman. She actually just retired but she was a female running all three of those. You've got

Denver, is run by a female; Salt Lake City is run by a female...

Blanche Touhill:

Can you explain that in some way?

Rhonda Hamm-Niebruegge:

You know, it's interesting because we, ourselves, talk about it. There's a couple of small airports but there's some very large airports that are run by women and we get together and we're good friends and we have a network within ourselves to sort of push our ideas and stuff through and I think we've all come to the same conclusion and it is that we don't look at it so much as what's wrong or what's right; it's a problem-solving and all of us like to solve problems and all those airports have problems. You're not going to go into a large airport and life is going to be perfect. They're problem airports and a lot of hands have changed in all of those airports and, at the end of the day, I think the reason the ones that are successful in it now is because they have looked at it like I've looked at Lambert. It's a puzzle that's maybe broken and we've got to bring it back together, and how do you bring in all the different partners to that? And we are about partnering. None of us can do this...I know that I can't do this on my own and in talking with every one of them, they see the same thing. I think a lot of the airport directors in the past...and I'm not just speaking out of St. Louis; I'm talking about across the country...have not looked at the partnerships that are out there or what role that they can play and all of us have said that was one of the first things we changed when we took the roles.

Blanche Touhill:

Did they have backgrounds like you had?

Rhonda Hamm-Niebruegge:

None of them came from an airline background. A lot of them had started...they had aviation management backgrounds. Some of them had started where they worked in the properties department for the airport or they might have worked in the finance department for the airport and they got a lot of experience. I'm the only one

who came from an airline background but they moved their way up through the airports.

Blanche Touhill:

Let me change the subject a little bit: Did you have trouble moving up as a woman, as you were going through your career?

Rhonda Hamm-Niebruegge:

I did not. At Ozark which was a very male-dominated company, they welcomed me into it, and I always wanted the outlet that was probably the most unlikely so I loved the operations so I loved being out on the air field and I loved being around the airplanes and the jet fumes and all of that. Most of the females in the airlines at that time were in the flight services or the reservations or maybe the food catering side of it. I wanted the operations and so there wasn't many females in that side and the Ozark management team was great. They saw kind of what I liked and I moved up really quickly and then when I came to TWA, it was the same thing. I mean, the vice president of North American Operation, when I first talked with him and he said, "I think you'll fit in well" and he said, "You can have a supervisor role wherever you want. We'll you put in passengers..." ...and I said, "Well, don't put me in passengers. I know that. Put me on the ramp. I need to learn more about larger aircraft and the ramp" and he looked at me and said, "You're going to do fine." Fortunately, I think a little bit because of my personality, I'm not shy and, again, I have my brothers to thank for that, but I was never scared of men. I was never scared of men-dominated roles and so that never came across as, "Oh, well, gee, will she fit? Will she be able to move..." ...because that was never a thought for me. It was never a concern that I couldn't do it and I think that came across and I did not encounter that; I never did.

Blanche Touhill:

If you had been born 50 years earlier, would you have accomplished what you have?

Rhonda Hamm-Niebruegge:

I don't know. You know, it would be hard to say because aviation, for so many decades was a male-driven industry

and I was the first female vice president of an operation. There had been some small ones but to run an operation of that size, I was the first female to run a large North American Airport Operation like that and that didn't happen until '97, late '97, so that's pretty late in the scheme of things, to get into a role like that but I just didn't encounter that. I think it would have been harder.

Blanche Touhill:

Well, if you had been born 50 years earlier and the airline industry really wasn't as developed as it is in your...

Rhonda Hamm-Niebruegge:

Right.

Blanche Touhill:

Would you have gone into something else and been a leader?

Rhonda Hamm-Niebruegge:

I think I would have only because that's my nature. For me, it's self-serving and it's very self-satisfying to know that you can make a difference in something and, for me, it's not about the ego. It's not about the title. It's not even necessarily about the pay. It's about knowing that I, myself, could do something and make a difference or have an impact on something and I think that's something you're born with, quite honestly. I think you either like that life or you don't and I think there's nothing wrong with either way. It's just, you have to be a person that has that sort of gratification of, "I want to do more and I want to do better and I want to leave something. I want to be able to say that..."...so I think if it hadn't been this industry, it would have been something else but I still think I would have probably gone in the leadership role.

Blanche Touhill:

How did you join the International Women's Forum?

Rhonda Hamm-Niebruegge:

I got a phone call one day. I did not know about the Forum, to be honest. I was in a lot of groups, a lot of different groups and I got a phone call from Joanne Griffin who said, "Would you like to have breakfast with a few women and I?" and, of course, the first question is, "Okay, what do you want? What are we going to be asked to do?" and she said, "No, I just want to talk to you about an

informal group that we think you might like,” and so I met them in Clayton and it was Barb Tarkington and Joanne and I think it was...I’m trying to remember, there were four ladies...I think Jo (Wanno?) might have been there. I’m trying to remember who the four were, and they sort of said, “What do you know about IWF?” and I said, “Nothing, I really don’t.” So they sort of gave an overview and talked about it and talked about what they do. It struck me because I like smaller, intimate groups. I enjoy the company of women and I enjoy learning about different things and sometimes I think we’re more open and we’re more prone to talk about the pros and the cons and the goods and the bads versus a men’s good sometimes. It’s always, they don’t want to show the bad side. It’s always, everything’s great. So the way that they explained it to me, the way that they talked had an interest. So I decided, “Yes, thank you for the invite and I’d love to.” I’m still kind of skeptical because I wasn’t sure if it would be what I thought and I really did not want another group where I had to put an effort forth in chairing and organizing and planning and all these things so it was a nice way and I remember the first dine-around I went to. I thought, well, this is fun; this is fun; I like this! “We do these?” ; “Yes, we do them all year long,” and I can tell you, I have come to love this group. I mean, I have met so many women. I knew who you were but I can’t say I knew you and that’s the same way. There are women within the group who I obviously have done business with and maybe worked with on other projects or had known but there’s a wide range of the group that I did not know and when you realize, even in our community, how many talented women there are, it’s amazing to me and so for me, getting to know everybody and, again, these small groups which I just love and everybody’s interests are different, then everybody has cross-over interests. It’s been a really good experience for me. I always said, I didn’t want to take on any more leadership roles. Well, I volunteered to chair for the activities committee but it’s not because I feel like

it's work. I feel like it's something that I like doing and, again, I can contribute back without it being a burden and so it's been great.

Blanche Touhill:

Why don't you talk a little bit about your family and how they fit into this career of yours because it is a 24/7 professional commitment.

Rhonda Hamm-Niebruegge:

Well, my husband and I have been married 27 years and we have three kids. They're amazing kids and I laugh sometimes because we look at those that are like my husband whose personality is a lot different than mine, much more reserved, much more laid back, doesn't have that huge desire to go out and do something prolific in the world. I mean, wonderful man, wonderful worker, always had a steady career but he's different than I am and so our kids have grown up seeing that in the both of us and we both have always worked. My husband's always been extremely supportive of my career and who I was so he always said, "We'll do this together. We'll figure it out." When the kids were little...now they're 26, 24 and 20...but when they were little, there were challenges. I mean, you always had to run them everywhere. I might have been out of town, my husband and I always had to set our schedule so that he traveled, I didn't and who was going to be there. So, you work with them and I think it's funny because I think the kids learned themselves to be a little more independent and we took every minute with them as precious so the times that we were together as a family, we did fun stuff and because I worked in the airline business, we had the travel benefits. So they learned to like to travel and we took them from the time they were babies on with us and did a big trip every year and tried to get them to see all different parts of the U.S. and other countries. So we've done a lot of travel. My kids, still to this day, love to travel. They miss their passes but they love to travel. So, it was interesting, as they got older, seeing if that would have a negative or a positive impact on them because you're never quite sure as parents, you

always want to make sure you're doing the right thing, but I look at it today and I think it had a positive impact. I mean, the fact that we both worked, they saw us pull together as Mom and Dad, as a husband and wife and rarely did things fall through the cracks. So I think it helped our kids to sort of look at that, you can have both things in life: you can have a family; you can have a career; you can have fun. You can have those things. It's not without a lot of work but you can have them because people say all the time, "Wasn't it hard to balance in that type of career? Did your husband stay home?" and I said, "No, no, he always...still does, always had a working career too" and I said, "You know, I think we were young and naïve and we just didn't think about it. You just did it. It was sort of like your job: Okay, we want children. We always wanted children so they were going to be a part of our careers and I always wanted a career so that was not an option, so how do you work through it? So you sort of just do and I look back now and I think, okay, at 53, I wouldn't want to raise three small children at 53 but at that time in our lives, we had the energy and we had the desire and we knew we both wanted careers. So, I look at my daughter today, who's 26...and we're fortunate, two of our kids have graduated; both have come back to St. Louis; both are working and this is where they want to be which is nice for us because we both grew up in Missouri, my husband and I both did and so far, two of our three kids have decided this is where they'd like to stay as well. So we're still very close to them and our youngest one is away at college but he calls on Sunday and says, "Oh, what's for dinner? I know it's Sunday dinner" because we love to cook and so we make a big deal out of Sunday dinners and we make a big deal out of, when the family can get together and cooking and all my kids have learned to cook and they've learned to be self-sufficient and so we look at that as making us very proud, that we didn't have to give up the family for a career and our kids were able to learn from us and we were able to pull it together and keep it

close enough that they've done well and succeeded and they're talking about their own families and on, so it's a good family, that piece is, and I can honestly say, I don't think I could have done that on my own. I was very fortunate with Steve and the partnership we've always had. So he's been there and I've been there for each other and so we've always had that and one of my kids said to us a couple months ago, he said, "Have I ever heard you and Dad argue?" and we both laughed because we thought, well, surely you have and he said, "I haven't. I've never heard you argue" and I think, well, I know we have. I know that that's happened. I guess it was just behind the scenes. But it was sort of one of those moments, those aha moments, you say, well, I think that's a good theme, that our kids could see that, that we didn't. It wasn't so stressful that it took a burden in our own personal lives between each other. So, a fun family, a wonderful family and travel is one of our greatest things that we love to do. We also own a farm and it's out near the Herman area and my husband loves his farm and the boys love the farm and so they spend a lot of time hunting out there and getting away when it does get too hectic in the life here, they go out there. So that's a passion of his and my passion is going to the wineries adjacent to the farm and then cooking and we all like the outdoors so we spend a lot of time outdoors if we have it. So, you find those balances in life. You have to. These jobs are hectic and I've always said, I think to be that successful, you have to be successful in your personal life, whatever that may be, I think you have to find peace in that personal life and I've been fortunate in that we have good health and we have been able to find that balance and so the personal life is very satisfying which makes the worst day in your work life doable.

Blanche Touhill:

Well, I've often thought it would be terribly difficult to have a hectic job and then have a hectic home and that eventually one would give, I think.

Rhonda Hamm-Niebruegge: Yeah. I would agree with that and I have friends who unfortunately I've had to watch that and it becomes a challenge because at the end of the day, when I go home, I know I have a supportive husband to go to and that makes it better. If it was a bad day or just something you really didn't want to face, you're not going home alone or going into another situation. So I do think that that makes it better and I've been blessed to have that.

Blanche Touhill: What do you see in the future personally?

Rhonda Hamm-Niebruegge: Personally, I'm a person who will probably never not work because it's so gratifying to me. We live in the city now and I love living in the central west end. I think I'd like to do this job for a few years because there's a lot of stones still not turned and things that I want to see happen but I would like to do something else, I think. When I say it's time to sort of, okay, what's that last step in my career, I'd like to do something and I think, for the most part, it would be something that can be involved with, again, the city, something that could be involved with maybe a project in the city or a project with leaving this decade of history and what it meant to the changes of the city and the region. But I don't see me ending a career anytime soon. I think that for me, the thrill and just the need to satisfy by doing something is important so hopefully I'll stay healthy enough that I can do that for a long time to come. I see my husband retiring though. He would love to retire and say, "Okay, I can spend more time out at the farm and do those things" and that's okay. That would be fine with me too.

Blanche Touhill: So, your third child is a boy?

Rhonda Hamm-Niebruegge: Mm-hmm, he is.

Blanche Touhill: And it's unknown at this moment what he wants to do?

Rhonda Hamm-Niebruegge: Well, he's in the Engineering School at Mizzou so he is at Mizzou. All three of our children stayed within the university systems of Missouri so I had one that went to

Missouri State University, one to University of Central Missouri and our youngest is at Mizzou. He's the one that may not stay here though. He's got a little bit more of my adventure in him. I think he would really like, I think, to do a stint abroad. He's talking about that more and more. I always kind of wanted all the kids to do that and the two older ones just had no interest in that so this one does and I would like to see that maybe he would do that. Like any selfish mom, I kind of want him to come back but it will be interesting to see what he does.

Blanche Touhill:

And did your brothers go back to your home town area?

Rhonda Hamm-Niebruegge:

They did. They all are still down there today. One's a high school coach and history teacher and one is on the lumber yard for years and is in the insurance and then the other one works for the highway department for the State of Missouri.

Blanche Touhill:

But they're not farmers?

Rhonda Hamm-Niebruegge:

They're not farmers. We still have the farm. We still have the farm we all grew up on. My dad still has it. My mom and dad are still living. They don't live on the farm. Dad rents it out but they still have it. So they, too, are all avid hunters and so they like the farm because it's got a lot of hunting acreage on it. But, yeah, they all are within about a five, ten-mile radius.

Blanche Touhill:

Are there women in the pipeline for the airline industry?

Rhonda Hamm-Niebruegge:

There are but there's not enough. I mean, I think that's one of the things that I would like to help do. There's a number of us who have talked about that, in grooming more women for these high profile jobs like the airport directors and so I do think women now see some very good success stories, and as I said, some of these larger airports are run by women. I think that's helped to open the door so we're hoping that that pipeline can grow. I know we certainly, as a group, even though there's only about 17 of us, it's one of the things we're out talking to all

the time. I love to talk to young groups here, whether it's men or women, but to talk about careers and it doesn't matter what career you want, you can do it and don't be afraid, regardless of your sex or your background or your race, you can do it. So I enjoy that piece, I enjoy the mentoring piece and getting out and talking with a lot of the young women and men to talk about aviation and what a role it plays in the job market. I mean, it's a huge employer but you would like to see women rise to some of these high level roles and we're continuing to hopefully add to that.

Blanche Touhill:

Is there anything else you want to add?

Rhonda Hamm-Niebruegge:

No. It's been nice in this role. I've gotten a little bit more involved in Washington as well so I am on a National Freight Advisory Committee now and that's another interesting sort of piece and facet where I really believe we can take the airport and grow the cargo opportunities here. It's something that I've said from Day One and we're continuing to really grow as a region. We have so much capacity for the growth of cargo in all forms of transportation. So that advisory committee is another eye-opening experience because it's under the Obama Administration and it was working with LaHood. Now it's working under the new Secretary Fox but it's fascinating to see and hear what other cities, other states are looking at doing to try to combat, you know, what's the next decade look for us, and I think what it's taught me is that you can't just look at two years out or three years out if you don't have these long-term views of what is in the next 20, 30, 40 years. So that sort of takes you back into just not looking at a day-to-day and really thinking on long-term strategic planning. So that's been a fun piece for me as well, getting involved in this group and learning more about it and how it can hopefully help support the state in growth in terms of jobs and transportation modes of all forms with cargo movements.

Blanche Touhill:

Are we in competition with Kansas City?

Rhonda Hamm-Niebruegge:

You know, I don't believe we are because we're on kind of opposite ends of the states, not necessarily opposite ends but we're a good distance apart so from a passenger competition, I don't think so. I think we have a lot more to offer. We are clearly a lot bigger than what they are so I think that's good. In terms of cargo, we probably have a little bit of competition with them but I think we can enhance each other. If they have a strong cargo movement, that benefits us and vice versa because a cargo is just not for air; it's also the rail and the ground and the water as well. So they have a great port system; we have a good port system. There's rails all throughout Missouri. So I think the goal would be for the two of us...and I have talked to their airport director quite a bit...the goal would be to more partner and say, "Any growth that we get, especially on the cargo side, is a growth for Missouri which means good things for all of us." So I don't think we look at ourselves as competitors. Other people might but I don't think we do and I certainly think for the state, we can have two strong airports.

Blanche Touhill:

Well, thank you very much.

Rhonda Hamm-Niebruegge:

You're welcome.