

NASA HEADQUARTERS ORAL HISTORY PROJECT
EDITED ORAL HISTORY TRANSCRIPT

SUMARA M. THOMPSON-KING
INTERVIEWED BY REBECCA WRIGHT
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WRIGHT: Today is March the 4, 2015. This oral history is being conducted with Sumara Thompson-King at NASA Headquarters in Washington, DC, for the NASA Headquarters Oral History Project. Interviewer is Rebecca Wright, assisted by Sandra Johnson. Ms. Sumara Thompson-King serves as the NASA General Counsel, and was appointed to this position in June 2014. Congratulations again on this still-new role.

THOMPSON-KING: Thank you.

WRIGHT: You have been working with the space agency for almost 30 years now, and started your career with NASA at the Goddard Space Flight Center [Greenbelt, Maryland] in 1986. If you would today start by sharing with us how you learned of that opportunity and describe the process that you had to go through to get that job.

THOMPSON-KING: I will. I'm a packrat. I'm kind of an unofficial office historian, a keeper of records—that's why this folder is sitting here on my desk. I read the list of possible topics that we would discuss, and when I saw this question, I wanted to check the folder that contains my employment actions. I realized I still have the ad from when I found out about that job. I remember exactly how I found out about this job.

I'm going back in time before we had the Internet. The way government jobs were advertised was in a booklet. You could go to the local libraries in the Washington, DC, area to find a copy of the booklet, because all the federal jobs were published every week or every two weeks. It was a little booklet, and it listed all the jobs across the United States that were available. I was a 905, which is the federal position classification number for an attorney, so you could just go through that OPM [Office of Personnel Management] booklet and see what jobs were announced across the government. I went to our local library to look at that booklet and look for a job.

I'm looking at the sheet of paper that I used, which was an event flyer from the library. On the back of this sheet [that I've kept in this file], because I didn't go to the library with any paper, I wrote down three jobs that were available. Goddard is the third job that I wrote down that day. I don't know the date that I went to the library. I remember, I was home in bed, and I knew I needed to look for another job. I got out of bed and I went to the library, and that's how I found this job. The closing date to submit an application for the Goddard job was July 9th.

I remember the reason I was really interested in this position at Goddard was because NASA did something very unusual for the federal government. It had a non-supervisory GS-14 [General Service pay scale] legal position, meaning you could be promoted up to GS-14 and not have to be a supervisor. I didn't want to be a supervisor at that point, so I thought, this is great. I can get promoted up to a GS-14 and not have to supervise. It was a ladder job advertised at the 11, 12, 13, and then a note indicated potential promotion to a 14. I applied for the job, and I have notes in my folder about the things I did—I sent a letter to Goddard dated July 7; I went for the interview on August 7; and I have the letter where they offered me a job on August 11, 1986.

WRIGHT: Wow. This moved quickly.

THOMPSON-KING: That's exactly what I'm telling you, this was fast. It doesn't happen like that these days. Debra Miller sent me that letter, and then I reported for duty August 2, 1986. That's quick.

The interview was with the Acting Chief Counsel at Goddard at that time. He later became the Chief Counsel, Lawrence [F.] Watson. He had interviewed other folks, and when I came for the interview, I had taken off work. My supervisor knew I was going for an interview. I'm not sure what details I told her, but by the time I came back to my office, I think I came back the next day, he had already called her for a reference check. My supervisor was leaving the agency, and she told me the one question he asked was, "If she's so good, and you're leaving, why aren't you taking her with you?"

She said, "Oh, I'd take her with me if I could, but I can't take her with me, and that's why I'm telling you, you should take her." I appreciated that, because I had a wonderful supervisor at my prior job. Her name was Merrily Raffa. But, things were changing there, and all of us were starting to look for other opportunities. It was just fortunate that this Goddard position became available, because even I knew that NASA jobs, particularly legal jobs, just did not become available.

Back then, few NASA jobs were advertised. See, that's the other thing people will find very odd. When I tell folks about it, they ask, "You didn't know anybody? They really just hired you out of the blue through an ad? It really worked?" People still have this perception that if you see a government job advertised, they've already got it wired for somebody.

I said, “No, I knew absolutely no one at Goddard. I didn’t know anybody who worked for NASA. No, really.” It truly was a cold call. Apparently, it was a good interview. I started working there in August of ’86.

WRIGHT: It’s quite good timing on your part. In August of 1986 the Agency was still recovering from the [Space Shuttle] Challenger [STS-51L] accident, and of course, Goddard was involved. Share with us some of those first experiences and what your first thoughts were of going to work for the Space Agency. At any point in your life, had you ever thought about going to work at NASA before you saw that job advertised?

THOMPSON-KING: I had no idea. I don’t even know if I really knew that NASA had a legal office. It didn’t surprise me that NASA legal jobs existed, because I had worked in several federal agencies, but I just never thought of being a lawyer for NASA.

Growing up in Texas, of course I knew about NASA. My father was a civil servant. He’s a retired civil servant. We lived in Fort Worth, Texas, and if you know anything about that area, then you know that’s where there’s a large federal presence. General Services Administration [GSA] was the agency he worked for. They had a number of facilities there. My father was a chemist. He worked in their laboratories, testing items and writing specifications for items that the government purchased, because back in those days, GSA bought everything. We lived in Fort Worth because of his job, so I never had the chance, really, to see the NASA Center in Houston.

In Fort Worth, my mother was an elementary school teacher, and she loved the space program. What I later found out is that she watched Johnson Space Center [Houston, Texas] being built. When she would travel to Houston, or when her parents would pick her up from college,

they'd stop in Houston. Back in those days, people would just ride around; that was their Sunday afternoon activity. They were watching the homes being built in Clear Lake, because the folks knew the Johnson Space Center was being built, it was growing. I can't imagine Clear Lake being empty, but my mother would say, "Oh, yes, I remember when there was nothing there, and they were starting to build the houses, and they were building the Center."

When we were kids, if the news was on and they showed a clip of the launches or anything about NASA, my mother had the TV on and had us in front of it. I even remember one time, I went outside trying to look up to see if I could see the rocket launching. Of course, I didn't know it was launching from Cape Canaveral [Florida] at that time, because I thought it was in Texas, because everybody had a Texas accent who was talking on the TV, that's what I remember, and my mother talked about the program. I just had a perception that everything was happening in Texas. I knew it said Cape Canaveral, but I think I thought it was around Galveston [Texas], because I was a kid. I didn't really know where it was. Later on, I figured all that out. But I think every child in America knew who John [H.] Glenn was. I don't think I really knew the other astronauts, except I did know [Virgil I. "Gus"] Grissom and [Edward H.] White by name, because when that tragedy happened [Apollo 1 fire], my mother was very upset, so I remember.

That Apollo tragedy sticks in my mind the same way the [President John F.] Kennedy assassination stuck in my mind, because I was a child, and I was in Fort Worth the day that President Kennedy was killed. I remember that day very vividly as a child, because it was the first time I can remember adults screaming and crying. I didn't know adults screamed and cried. Then, the next time was when the capsule fire occurred. There were adults who were crying about that incident, too.

Those were my earliest memories of NASA, and then the landing on the Moon was very exciting. But it came at a very turbulent time. There were lots of things going on. We had the assassination of both Martin Luther King Jr. and Robert [F.] Kennedy. This thing called Chappaquidick— that I couldn't pronounce back then—but there was this guy who was the President's brother [Edward M. "Ted" Kennedy] who was with some woman someplace that he shouldn't have been, maybe—that's what the adults seemed to be saying—and there was some bridge, and he allegedly did—I'm saying "allegedly" now, but like I'm hearing the adults—he was with somebody who wasn't his wife and something bad happened. I later found out what it was all about [automobile accident on the Dike Bridge on Chappaquiddick Island, and death of Mary Jo Kopechne, July 18, 1969].

That was all happening around the [Apollo 11] landing. I remember because the adults are talking. It kind of overshadowed the landing on the Moon. It was a big event for me, and I think most of us in this country, but I also remember the other thing that was going on, seemingly around that time, and that had a lot of conversation going on. That's what I knew about NASA.

When I came to Washington and I was working here in 1982, I don't think I even knew there was a Goddard Space Flight Center. I don't think I knew that there was really a NASA [Headquarters] right downtown, three blocks away from where I worked as a summer legal intern at GSA Region One's office on 7th and D Streets, SW.

In those days, to learn about a federal agency before you went to an interview, you didn't have the Internet, where you could look up information. The Government Printing Office used to print something called The United States Government Manual. I don't think I have one anymore. In it was a listing of the federal agencies. That's what I used to educate myself before I went out

for the interview. I got that Government Manual. I opened it up, I'm like, "Oh, there's a whole bunch of these NASA facilities all around the United States!"

NASA Headquarters at that time was two blocks away from where I was working in 1986. That Headquarters building was right across from the [Smithsonian National] Air and Space Museum on Maryland Avenue, but I did not know that building was NASA Headquarters and I didn't know about all these other locations. I knew about Kennedy [Space Center, Florida, KSC], and I knew about Johnson, but I didn't know there were seven other locations, and then all these other activities and installations going on. It was quite enlightening to find Goddard, and actually to find out it was so close to my home. I lived in Hyattsville [Maryland], so it was truly only 15 minutes away from home.

WRIGHT: What a great commute, great job.

THOMPSON-KING: Yes. I said, "I've hit the lottery!"

WRIGHT: Goddard is so unlike downtown, because it's like a wide open college campus full of trees.

THOMPSON-KING: It's a campus. It absolutely was a campus. I remember, truly a college campus, because the day that I reported for work in August, so it was August, and I came in my suit, my lawyer attire, and when I parked my car and started walking, I saw somebody in Birkenstock sandals, Bermuda pants, and a t-shirt. I was following him; he and I were going the same direction. He was reporting for duty as well. If you knew the Goddard culture, you would have known that

his work attire was not unusual, but I didn't know. He sat down in the same room with me. Then there was also someone in the room with me who was not American, who was from an Asian country. I didn't think we could hire non-U.S. citizens.

What I later found out is that the U.S. citizen who reported for duty with me had been a summer [employee.] I guess Goddard had a co-op [cooperative education] program, so then he was brought on as a full-time employee. He had been working around Goddard, and he was now being converted into a full-time employee. He worked on a particular project, and that's how they all dressed. I can't remember now if he was a scientist or an engineer, but he had worked on one of the programs.

Regarding the other individual, I learned that NASA could and would hire international students. Foreign students who had J-1 visas were eligible to work on NASA projects. This individual was one of those students that came to the United States on such a visa, and NASA specifically hired students to come and work on some particular project.

WRIGHT: So, your first orientation was more of a cultural perplexity of where these people came from, and why you were all sitting in a room.

THOMPSON-KING: Yes.

WRIGHT: I guess, in a way, you were one as well, because I believe, if I read correctly, you were one of the first females to be hired into the legal department.

THOMPSON-KING: I was. It was a very unusual experience. Women attorneys were not unusual for me, but I came to realize how unusual I was at Goddard. I knew I was going to be unusual. I had attended a women's college, so for four years I was not unusual, not really. I was only unusual in that I came from the Midwest, and I was unusual because of my race at college, because on most small Northeastern liberal arts college campuses, the African American community was very small. I think we probably had more Asian students at Smith College [Northampton, Massachusetts] than we had African American students at one point in time.

Then when I went to law school, for three years in Georgetown [University Law Center in Washington, DC], women made up a significant part of my class; I won't say we were 50 percent, we weren't there, but there were enough women that I didn't feel odd being a woman. I was a little bit surprised, but Georgetown at that time—and that was one of the reasons why I was interested in the school—Georgetown made a particular effort to recruit a diverse student body—men, women, racial ethnic—and it was very apparent, because I wasn't the one and only.

When I was in college, I had an experience of walking into a room, a large lecture room, and you know everybody knows you, even if they don't know you, because—to be blunt—you're the piece of pepper in the sea of salt. When you don't show up for class, the professor knows. When you say something wrong, everybody knows. You can't hide. Frankly, that's a horrible feeling. You're always on edge, because you are the stand-out. You don't want to be the stand-out, and no one's trying to make you the stand-out, but you are, because you are different from everybody else.

When I went to law school, I was dreading having that feeling that I'm the one and the only. So, in my section I was so happy that I wasn't the one and the only. I said, "Oh, good, they can confuse me with somebody else." That annoyed me at times, when people would confuse me

with someone else—no, I’m not that black woman, I’m this black woman. But at least I had somebody who others could confuse me with.

When I got out to Goddard, I was back in that one and only situation. I gave a talk a few weeks ago, and I noted that at Goddard, I had four things wrong with me. When I would go to meetings at Goddard often—often—in the room, I would be the only woman, the only person of color of any kind, period. At all. I would be the only one without a technical background. I was a government major at a liberal arts school. And I was under 30. At these meetings, nobody wanted to hear anything I had to say. I felt that most of the people in the room couldn’t believe that I was the lawyer assigned to give them legal advice. I sensed that they thought, “What could you possibly know? Why are you here? That was really how I was treated.

I was ignored. Not acknowledged, ignored. Then, if I said anything, “Oh, why? Why? Why are you here? Why do we have to listen to you?” I have told folks that when I was sitting at a table—my knees used to knock under the table, because I knew I would have to give advice to an unreceptive audience. That’s what I was there for, to give legal advice, and I had these wonderful opportunities, but it was scary when I first started.

Also, at that time, and that was 1986, for those of us in the procurement law area, we understand the significance of the date 1984; 1984 is when Congress passed, and a new statute went into effect, called the Competition in Contracting Act, and it’s known by CICA. What CICA did was standardize the acquisition requirements across the entire federal government. Prior to that, DoD had its set of rules for how it was conducting its acquisitions, how it bought things for the various military branches. NASA, because we’re NASA, and we’re under the [National Aeronautics and] Space Act, we had our own rules for how we were going out and buying things. Then there were other civilian federal agencies, and they bought things, and they had their own

rules. So, the Competition in Contracting Act said no, you are all going to come under the same set of requirements. The requirements were codified separately—one for the military and the other was for civilians agencies. Title 10 of the U.S. Code is the Armed Services Procurement Act. Title 41 is what the civilian agencies use.

NASA is covered under Title 10. That's always a story to tell people, how we came to be covered under Title 10, even though we are a civilian agency, and the Space Act makes that very clear, that we are a civilian Space Agency. The reason we are covered under Title 10—short history, is—and yes, it's significant because yesterday was the 100th birthday of NACA [National Advisory Committee for Aeronautics], and NACA ended in 1958, because it was subsumed into NASA. So, if you actually look at the Space Act, you will see where there is language that talks about the end of NACA. Because NASA took over the former NACA's activities and operations, NASA's acquisition authority was based on the Title 10 authorities that NACA had as a military organization. Since the day NASA started, it has been covered under Title 10. Because a lot of the things that we did involved activities from a former military organization, it made sense for NASA to continue to use NACA's acquisition authority to operate and to buy things, even though we were established as a civilian agency. If you think about it, who else buys rockets? Our acquisitions had little in common with other civilian agencies back in those days. So, we are covered under Title 10. That's just my very simple explanation.

When I began my NASA career in 1986, NASA folks were accustomed to using the NASA procurement regulations and having acquisition flexibilities, because we are NASA and we are “special.” Beginning in 1984, NASA began complying with the Federal Acquisition Regulations [FAR] that both civilian and military agencies are required to use.

Many NASA employees, at the time, had the attitude that we really didn't have to do what everyone else in the government was doing, because we were sure there was a way to carve out an exception for us at NASA so we didn't have to comply with the FAR.

So, here I am, the new attorney coming in, telling program managers that they need to follow CICA and the FAR. NASA used to have its own regulation called the NASA Procurement Regulations, NPR. They would ask, "Now you're telling us that we can't use our NPR, we have to use this thing called FAR? What's FAR?" Federal Acquisition Regulation. "Well, we don't know anything about Federal Acquisition—we know the NPR."

I'd respond, "Well, you have to learn, and we have to comply with the Federal Acquisition Regulation," then NASA created its own supplement to the FAR. We developed something called the NASA FAR Supplement, which we still have to this day. Back in those days, NASA obtained an exception to some of the FAR provisions, because NASA had a way of conducting our procurement competitions that differed from everyone in the government, including DoD [Department of Defense], and we wanted to continue using that NASA evaluation process under the FAR. So, there I was with those four things against me, and I'm the new attorney telling them about this new way of conducting acquisitions. The program officials were not enthusiastic about using the FAR or even the NASA FAR Supplement.

Giving legal advice on acquisition activities was a big part of what I did, and it turned out to be very helpful to me. I'm talking with you so much about procurement because procurement, I later learned, was the bread and butter of NASA, according to the General Counsel at that time, who was John [E. "Jack"] O'Brien. Larry Watson took me downtown to meet Mr. O'Brien. He died, I think, in 2012. I sent a note to his family, reminiscing about the day that I met him.

He said to me, “Sumara, you’re at NASA at a great time. Great opportunities here. There are going to be a lot of changes and people are going to leave. One day you could even be in this job; you might be General Counsel. But, the bread and butter of NASA is federal procurement. Learn federal procurement.”

I said, “Okay.”

WRIGHT: A sound piece of advice.

THOMPSON-KING: Yes. I looked at his career, and if you look at what he did in his career, and you looked at NASA, and still to this day, 85 percent of our budget is spent on contract awards. We are an acquisition agency. Now, things are changing, the world is different, we are now entering more partnerships under NASA’s “other transactions” authority. While today, more budget dollars are used to fund such partnership agreements, still, the majority of NASA’s budget funds go to procurements conducted under FAR procedures.

When I came into Goddard, I didn’t realize how large NASA’s contractor workforce was. I would later tell people, when they would look at Mission Control [Center], when they would see Mission Control on TV, I said, “All of those are not civil servants. Some of those people are contractor employees.” When we award contracts, contractors provide us services, or they build hardware for us, but NASA spends a lot of money making contract awards and creating jobs in communities all around this country, and those contract awards are not just going to large corporations. NASA contract awards also go to small businesses and the contract awards result in job opportunities for people around the United States.

We have a sizeable influence on the economies of different communities, and I began to realize that's why Congress is very interested in what we do. [NASA Administrator Charles F. Bolden] Charlie went to visit a company recently outside of Philadelphia [Pennsylvania] that makes a product, some kind of fabric that we're using at [NASA] Ames [Research Center, Moffett Field, California], for the thermal protection system on NASA's Orion spacecraft. I may be getting all this wrong, but the whole point is, it's a small company outside of Philadelphia. I'm sure people drive past it all the time and they have no idea what they do in there, but the key thing they do for us is they give us adhesive material that's helping us as we move forward with our space exploration program. Those are jobs, and that's a family business that is vibrant because of what they service and the goods that they provide to us.

Goddard was, in a way, for me, a proving ground, because I was a poli-sci [political science] major in college, but working at Goddard really showed me how the government worked. Coming to Headquarters gave me another dimension of that understanding. Understanding that much more of the federal government's work was performed by contractors than I had known, Goddard's workforce, even now, probably half of it is civil servants, and the other half of it is contractors. Then, I learned that Goddard had on-site contractors and off-site contractors. It was a great experience.

Also, the other thing I learned early in my NASA career, when I went to visit other Centers was that I didn't realize how different each Center was. When I started working on Goddard's campus, I thought, "They launch at KSC, but they're just like us, they're just a bigger version of us, and they're down in Florida, but they're just like us." I still think Goddard—for me—Goddard was a great learning experience, because I worked with both scientists and engineers. They're very different people. Very different people. But I thought every NASA Center had scientists and

engineers, and that there was a 50-50 balance between the populations of the two groups. Both scientists and engineers were influential at Goddard, so I didn't see one being dominant over the other. You had your science community, and you had the engineering community out there, so I just assumed every Center was set up that way. When I visited other Centers, I learned that all Centers didn't have both large science and engineering communities.

At all the NASA centers, there were folks who were in the non-technical jobs, that I will refer to as *the rest of us*, because we were the mission support organizations within the agency. Meaning that frequently, we were treated and felt like second-class NASA employees. By their actions, the technical community seemed to be saying, "You are just here because we're here." In those days, I wouldn't say that I felt like I was part of a team. We were there supporting the people who were doing the important work. Back then, if you didn't have that technical expertise, if you were a woman, and if you were young, and if you were African American, you really were considered useless and you were disrespected by some NASA colleagues, when you were dealing with certain issues.

I had a wonderful supervisor who was very supportive. The thing I appreciated about him was that he gave me the opportunity to go out and work with different clients and really cut my teeth on different issues. They may not have been happy to see me, some of those initial clients. They worried about my skillset. My supervisor, the Chief Counsel, didn't, and he sent me out every time. I was the second woman that had been hired in that office. Larry hired a third woman while I was there. The first woman, Dawn Oakley, left after I had been there about two months. Then Kathleen Janick was hired about three months after I came on board. She and I were probably the first two women who worked together at a NASA Center over a significant period of time.

We were promoted within the Office of the Chief Counsel and developed our skillset there. I didn't just work on procurement matters. The other thing about Goddard that was so great was that Larry developed us to be generalists; we had to do everything. I also laugh and say I did the pantyhose claims.

This is my perspective, my story. There were other Goddard attorneys in offices next door to mine; they may not remember things the way I'm remembering them. But I remember sitting there, and we would get claims. This was also back in the day when we had imprest funds available to pay different types of claims and expenses of Goddard civil servants. For example, when civil servants would go on travel, they would actually go get cash, so they would have cash for certain expenses, or if you were going downtown, and you needed to take a cab, you had to get cash from the imprest fund for your local travel expenses. Also, we would receive claims from civil servants for damage to their personal items. For example, Goddard still had those metal desks, you know, those metal government-issued desks, and there were women who would snag their pantyhose on the desks, and some of them believed that they should file a claim to be reimbursed for their expensive pantyhose – and back then, pantyhose and stockings were very expensive. The thought seemed to be, “Well, it wasn't my fault, it was that desk!”

So, we'd get the pantyhose claims. There weren't a lot of them, but I was shocked that we received any. Why did women think they could file those? But we also had the flat tire claims, so it wasn't just pantyhose. Because Goddard was a federal facility, with significant construction activity occurring daily, if a civil servant found a nail in their tire when they were in Goddard's parking lot, we'd get a claim saying the tire was damaged because Goddard didn't pick up the nail. We'd have people who would file claims to be reimbursed for their tires. Back in those days, we would have to respond. We would either pay it or we wouldn't. I was getting these, and I started

thinking, “Am I getting these because I’m the woman in the office?” But I later learned, no, you’re the person with the least seniority; you’re going to get these claims to work on and resolve.

A side benefit of dealing with such claims was that I had to learn to deal with people diplomatically. When an attorney advised not to pay a woman’s pantyhose claim, or a flat tire claim, or a broken windshield claim, that attorney had to tell the claimant. More often than not, a denial of a claim meant the claimant would come to talk to with you and appeal the denial. This helped me to develop my people skills.

In those days, what I observed about the Goddard culture was that the Center was struggling between the women who had college degrees and the women who didn’t. The women who didn’t have college degrees were usually in one of the secretarial positions, they had been there for a while, and they were the ones who were wearing pantyhose.

Remember that young man that I told you about who came with me on the first day of work, and he was wearing Bermuda shorts? Well, if you were a young woman who was an engineer and had been hired by Goddard, it would have been natural for you to think that your work attire could be as flexible as your male colleague’s attire. If a man wore shorts, women could wear shorts. Some secretaries viewed the attire of women engineers as inappropriate, and they thought that they spent less on their wardrobes than a secretary who was paid less but expected to wear pantyhose. When their pantyhose were damaged, these secretaries thought it was their right to be reimbursed by their employers, and I as a woman, appropriately attired to perform my job as an attorney, should understand the secretaries.

We were having trouble recruiting engineers across the board, because private companies were paying them so much more than we were paying them, because in the federal government you started in engineering as a GS-7. Back in those days, if you had a college degree, I think it

was special even to be paid at the GS-7 level. I think you were a 5; that is what a college degree got you, I think. So, we brought them in on a program, 7, 9, 11, where every six months an engineer was eligible for promotion, 7 to the 9 to the 11. We were able to promote engineers very rapidly under the special authority we had.

Also, Goddard was trying to recruit women engineers. These were engineers truly fresh out of college. They were 22-year-olds, 21-year-old women and men coming in, and these young women were dressing like the men. This is our generation: you dress like the men. So, if he's wearing shorts, of course I can wear shorts. This created a clash of cultures between the women who were wearing the pantyhose and the young women coming in who were dressing like the men they worked with.

Then, you had men—and I had to really learn this—who had been at Goddard when Goddard had beauty contests. I thought that was an exaggeration. No, it was not. These secretaries, who are now wearing pantyhose, because they're now 10 or 20 years older than when they began their jobs at Goddard, used to be in those beauty contests. I had to learn all of these things. Most of the young women coming in, who didn't know any of this; they weren't aware of the past culture. There were men who felt they could treat these college-educated women the way they had treated the secretaries. These college-educated women were rebelling, or expressing displeasure with how they were being treated, and that was not something these men had experienced from young women who worked for them in years past. It really became a clash of cultures out there. We had a significant number of EEO [Equal Employment Opportunity] actions.

I remember one of the cases that I had was a young woman who—as she told the story, and she was in my office in tears—she was in shorts and a t-shirt. That was their outfit in her work unit. She said her supervisor touched her knee. When they would go out for lunch, he would want

her to sit in the car—back then we had the bench front seats in cars—he wanted her to sit in the front seat, next to him, even if they were the only two in the car, and she felt he would retaliate in work assignments if she didn't comply and ride with him in the car. It was hard for me to hear these stories; it was hard for them to tell me what happened. It was hard for me not to cry when I was listening to this woman who was just saying, "I just want to do my job."

I struggled because I wanted to say, "You just can't wear short shorts to work." This was practical advice I wanted to give her. Even though I was really only about five years older than her, I knew that there were still certain things a young woman would be better off not doing even though it would have been acceptable if a man did the same thing. A young woman had to do things to take care of herself to avoid unwanted touching and to avoid sexual harassment, so she couldn't wear shorts like the men did. It was one of those unwritten rules. It wasn't fair. To protect ourselves and our careers, many women had to make those kind of decisions. It made us angry, it felt unfair, and many courageous women worked to force change. Some of those actions had a high personal and career cost, but their courage led to a changed work environment. We all had to work through it.

That was a tough time at Goddard. Not every male employee behaved like that, but we had folks, and we had a culture, where women had to deal with such behavior. It had to evolve. It did evolve. I say this—we had men who helped to make that evolution come. We could not have done it just as women alone. We didn't. But the leadership of men had to change, and then men who assumed those leadership positions had to require that their subordinates treat women in a more respectful way, to treat them as peers. So, that was going on during the '80s. It was truly a time of transition.

The women who had been toiling at the Center in non-technical careers, became the veteran woman employees at Goddard. Eventually, they were given opportunities to move out of the clerical and administrative positions into more professional jobs, because the Center recognized, we've got to deal with this disparity of opportunities for older versus younger woman. You're bringing in all these college-educated women, and then women with graduate degrees, who were being given more opportunities than the veteran women employees. It was a time of transition out there for the Agency so, it was very interesting to see the challenges that the leadership at the Center faced and how they dealt with those challenges.

There was also a childcare center at Goddard. At that point in time, in the Washington area, and frankly around the country, we had a number of significant actions that happened where children were abducted from the hospitals. Babies were stolen, things were happening to small children. We had a daycare center, so it became a huge issue about how we operated our daycare center, and who had access. It was operated by our exchange, GEWA, Goddard Employee Welfare Association. GEWA is a non-federal entity, so attorneys in the Goddard legal office were not the attorneys for GEWA. However, because GEWA conducted activities on our Center, we said to GEWA, "We've got to give you some advice about how you handle certain things and tell you where you need to go for further advice." NASA was really ahead of its time. There were very few agencies that had daycare centers. When I talked with attorneys from other agencies about my legal activities at Goddard, sharing "war stories," none of them had any experience dealing with legal issues involving the operation of a daycare on federal property. It was very interesting to have to deal with those issues.

This was also a time where we were dealing with AIDS. A few issues came up. I wasn't around during the [Joseph] McCarthy [era], but the 1990s seemed to become a little

McCarthyesque, because you'd see somebody, and if that person had a sore or something, people would get nervous, because they didn't know what it was so, they would think that it might be AIDS, and they would not want to have that person in the workplace. In workplaces across the United States, there were some folks that would say, "I'm not sure I want to work with that individual." Employers were in a difficult situation. They didn't want to discriminate by speculating that an employee had AIDS.

Then you have the flip side of that concern, which was concern for the health of the workforce. Employers were saying, "But we don't know what it is, and we don't know how it's caught, and we may be putting lives at risk." Now, we're more educated, but back then, people didn't know if it came from toilets, or if it was an airborne type of virus. So Goddard was not different than any other workplace-federal, state or private—in figuring out how to deal with AIDS issues or concerns. While I recall many a coffee break and lunch conversations amongst Goddard employees about how to deal with AIDS in the workplace, I do not recall any major personnel issues arising at Goddard that alleged discrimination because of AIDS. I believe that the senior leaders, at that time, worked to swiftly and sensitively to address any issues or concerns as they arose. It was a very interesting time to be a new lawyer.

At Goddard, our legal office had the view that we're not just giving legal advice, we're also counseling people, and this is what I also talk about with other NASA attorneys and with the senior leaders and program officials that I work with as General Counsel. Sometimes a lawyer's advice is just common sense. I say, "Let's sit down and think about this. Let's walk through this issue, let's talk about it. We know what you can do, but is that really what you should do? Let's really think about how we can come to some resolution, and not be legalistic about it, but really think through what the problem is and how we can best resolve it." NASA attorneys are and

should be engaging in these kind of conversations when issues arise and people come to talk with us. Sometimes people who come to see us say, “You’re the lawyer. Tell them they can’t do that, it’s illegal.” Or they say, “Show me a law or a court decision that says that I can or cannot do what I want to do.” Often my thought is, “No, it’s not quite that easy.” Sometimes there is no clear “legal” answer, and even where there is one, attorneys are doing their jobs best when they continue the discussion, offering approaches or outcomes that are beneficial.

Being an early career attorney at Goddard exposed me to broad and interesting issues. I got to work those issues I just talked about, so it wasn’t just procurement law that I learned at Goddard. We were truly a Chief Counsel’s Office. We gave advice on a whole range of things. I got to work with a range of people in the different programs, with different skillsets.

One of the other things I appreciated about the way our office was managed was that the Chief Counsel, at that time, rotated our assignments. I would start out being the attorney who would work on only science directorate acquisitions. Then, I started learning what PSI was. What the heck’s PSI? Pounds per square inch, in the construction industry. I became impressed with myself, “I know what PSI means!” Because we were doing a lot of construction work at Goddard, building new facilities, I learned a whole new area of the law. I learned new terms while dealing with Goddard’s architectural and design contracts, and I had to learn the law that addressed latent and patent defects. Nobody really focuses on such matters when you’re building a satellite, but when you’re building a building, those are important issues.

So at Goddard I received broad experience because of the different contracting issues I worked, and also the different non-procurement issues I worked. Goddard also had a number of unions, and so we had a lot of union activity out there. I’m talking a lot about Goddard, but here I am—is it 28 years later, or more? I’ve gone back to that experience, because I worked on a wide

array of legal matters then as a new attorney to the Agency, that now, as General Counsel, I am working on again. I'm looking at all of those issues every day. I never know what's going to come in the door. I have labor management issues that I have to address. I have personnel matters that may be the hot topic for the day. Then there's an acquisition, or now we've got funded Space Act Agreements to review. It is a myriad of very interesting things, and some of them are mundane, that I get to deal with them every day, like when I started my career at Goddard. So, I've come full circle.

WRIGHT: It was like an undergraduate training ground for where you are now. How much do you think, and you mentioned him a couple of times, Mr. Watson and his leadership during that time period, impact your group and you. Did that last for a while, and at what point you felt like it was time to move from Goddard, and try something new?

THOMPSON-KING: I'm still friends with Larry. I would not be where I am today without champions—plural. Within this Agency, he was my first champion. I use the word 'champion' when I talk with people about their career development, I use that phrase, and I say, "Frankly, you will never get anywhere without a champion. Your champion is the one who sees talent and skill in you that others may overlook or attempt to minimize. I don't care how good you are, how talented, you're not going to get opportunities unless there is somebody there to help you and to be an advocate for you."

I know there may be some who believe that her or his career success was achieved alone, but I would push back on that view. There's somebody out there who you may not know about who's pushing for you, who's advocating for you. We all have an advocate; that's how we move

from one place to another. It's not only that someone is giving you advice, mentoring you, but it's also you've got to have somebody who is going to do things for you like saying, "I want her at this meeting. Or, I want Sumara to give the briefing."

In some situations, you need your advocate's support to include defending you and standing up for you when others are not. Having an advocate who is respected is a huge benefit. That advocate, or champion as I refer to such folks, are the ones who say, "Okay, you're complaining about her, but I've decided that she's the person who's going to work on this." They give you that assignment, they put you in the right place. They make the opportunity happen for you. And of course, you have to deliver what is expected. You have to have somebody like that. That's who Larry was for me.

I became the first woman to—the first human being, so, woman—to need maternity leave [in the legal office]. I was terrified. I really was. I was the woman in the legal office with the most seniority. There were only two of us in the office in 1988, Kathleen Janick and me. I had been hired first. When I became pregnant, I had to go in to Larry, tell him I was pregnant, and then tell him how much maternity leave I wanted. I had saved up my sick leave and my annual leave, and this was all before the Family Medical Leave Act. I had calculated how much time I had saved to use for maternity leave, and I knew I wanted to be on leave for a time longer than I had for paid leave. I was going to have to request that I finish my maternity leave in a leave without pay status for six weeks. In my calculations, I had also figured out how much leave without pay I could take without it affecting my length of service standing for retirement. I was ready; but I was nervous. I went in to tell him I was pregnant, and to ask for four to five months off for maternity leave.

He responded, “Is that enough time?” Then I said to myself, what did he just say? Because that’s not what women were hearing when they went in to [ask for maternity leave]. He repeated, “Is that enough time?”

I said, “Yes, I think so.”

“We don’t want you to rush, we’ll be okay, we’ll work this out,” Larry said. When you had that kind of support, it makes coming to work easier. It made my career choices easier.

At the same time I was having that experience, there was another woman in my building who worked for another organization, who was also pregnant. She was having difficulty with her pregnancy. Women were typically given six weeks, I think, of leave, you could use any combination of sick and annual leave to request the six weeks. She needed eight. [Her supervisor] said, “I need a doctor’s note explaining why you need another two weeks.” So you had that disparity in treatment of maternity leave requests by different male supervisors. She was in tears.

Knowing what I know now about recuperating after a birth and bonding with, caring for and nursing a new baby, coming back after two months, I can’t even fathom trying to go back to work in such a short time frame. I know many women who have given birth, in past times and even in the present, in some cultures, and in some financial situations, cannot be in a non-paid or non-working status for two months; some women might be back working the next day. I felt very fortunate to have a supervisor who allowed me to take off the amount of time that I had requested. When I returned to work, I went back to my exact same job, and I continued to progress through my career. I recognize that this also was significant and not necessarily the norm for women who returned to the workplace when their maternity leave ended. My career was not limited because I had a five month maternity leave, nor was it limited because I became a mother.

But there did come a point—and Larry and I have talked about a difficult time in our relationship, but we got past that time. As a matter of fact, when I got this job and I sent him the note telling him that I had been appointed General Counsel, he reminded me of the difficult conversation we had. I laughed about it, and we shared our thoughts about it. It was a difficult conversation we had at Goddard when he made a decision that I did not think was fair for me. I went into his office—after I thought about it for a while—but I went in and told him my thoughts, why I had those thoughts, and he understood my concerns. He disagreed with me, but we talked to each other. Then I went on and I continued to do my work. But there was a part of me that said, I'm going to have to move on—not leave in anger— but I realized I might need to make a change. But I wasn't looking to make a change by leaving NASA, I just thought that I might need to look differently at opportunities that might arise. The opportunity that I focused on was looking for a job outside of Goddard, which meant NASA Headquarters.

And there were opportunities. In those days, if a vacancy became available at NASA Headquarters in the legal office, the heads of the divisions in the Office of the General Counsel [OGC] would send a note out to the Chief Counsels in the center legal offices (remember, this is pre-email, pre-personal computers on everyone's desk), asking whether any attorney at a NASA center was interested in interviewing for a job at Headquarters. It was an informal process. Really, that was our internal competition. OGC would send out the request, receive responses from the center Chief Counsel who forwarded information about an attorney who had expressed interest in the job, Headquarters would conduct an interview, and if an internal candidate was selected and she or he accepted the offer, the employee was transferred to the vacant position at Headquarters and began work; if no internal candidate expressed interest or was not invited for an interview or was not selected, then Headquarters posted a vacancy announcement and recruited externally.

Larry was the one who gave me my second most important piece of career advice, basically saying, “If you get an opportunity to work Headquarters, I’d advise you to take the one in the contract law division, rather than any other division at Headquarters.” He was in that mindset that procurement is the bread and butter of NASA. There were opportunities for me to come and work on the general law side of the house, which is the side of the house that handles fiscal law, legislation, personnel, and EEO matters. Those things were interesting, but here’s the thing that I also did not want to happen. People looked at me and said, “Well, of course you want to go work in general law. Don’t you want to handle EEO claims? Don’t you want to do civil rights work?”

In response to such questions, I thought to myself, so what people are trying to tell me is that I’m a woman and I’m African American, so my skill level is limited to civil rights cases. The boldness in me and my confidence said, “I’m a Smith College graduate. I was the first African American woman to be president of my senior class at college. I have gone to law school. I think I can handle legal matters other than civil rights cases. Every black lawyer doesn’t have to handle civil rights cases. We can work on other complex matters like government contracts. Really.” I heard through various sources in the Headquarters’ grapevine, that it was a shock to quite a few people that in hiring me, the NASA Office of the General Counsel thought that I was qualified to provide legal advice on government contracts.

WRIGHT: And this was in the early ’90s? This was the time frame?

THOMPSON-KING: Yes, because I came to Headquarters in 1991. When I would go to meetings, often I was the only woman and the only African American in the meeting, and hardly anyone in the meetings knew me or knew of me or worked with me. So, I had questionable government

contracts knowledge and unknown litigation skills, therefore, in the view of most officials I had limited credibility when I gave legal advice. Even now, but back then, there were very, very few African American who specialized in government contracts.

When I went to the JAG School, the Army's Judge Advocate General's Legal Center and School, I remember that there were few African American instructors. The JAG School educates military and civilian attorneys in basic and advanced federal procurement law. Attendance at the JAG School's annual contract attorney's course provides the necessary foundation in basic contract and procurement law for early career federal attorneys, so most NASA procurement attorneys have completed this course. There was only one African American instructor at the JAG school. He later became the Army's Acting Principal Deputy General Counsel, and has served as the Deputy General Counsel for Acquisition. Back then, he was the only one—the only instructor who was an African American, Levator Norsworthy. Also, back then, I do not recall any other civilian African American attending any of the government contracts course that I attended at the JAG School.

When I would go to other training, again I was back to being the pepper in a sea of salt. The major annual private sector government contracts training conference is held in Washington, DC, at the Omni Shoreham Hotel. The conference was held in a vast ballroom. I would look around the room, and I didn't see anybody that looked like me. This was a nationwide group of government contracts attorneys. Attorneys from all across the country, would fly to Washington to attend this course, so participants were not just Washington attorneys. In the early 1990s there were very few women, and very few people of color of any kind who attended. So, yes, I was an oddball when I would go to these meetings.

While I was an unfamiliar person to many people when I began working at Goddard, program and procurement official got to know me as I provided legal advice and reviews on various acquisition matters. I remember one of the wonderful things that happened after I had been there a couple of years. Kathleen and I went to a farewell party at Goddard—it wasn't a retirement; one of the people in procurement was leaving the Agency. She gave each of us a hat that she made for us, and they were called "green lawyer graduate hats." She said, "You both have stuck it out, and you showed them you know what to do." I remember her saying that in front of a crowd of people, because sometimes you don't know if other people know what you've been going through, or appreciate your skills. I appreciated her doing that, because she knew that we were young lawyers, and initially we didn't know what we were doing. We were learning. But we were hard-working and we were dedicated, and Goddard employees like her gave us the chance to develop our skills and demonstrate our ability to provide the legal services that were needed. I really appreciated that several people gave me the opportunity to grow and hone my skills. So, it wasn't just Larry. There were other people there at the Center who also helped me and Kathleen, and who acknowledged our contributions.

Another champion for both me and Kathleen was Janet Jew, a Goddard civil servant who worked in the procurement training division. When, I started at Goddard, I knew very, very little about government contracts. Kathleen and I went to a training class that Janet taught. She was the Goddard person responsible for training new contract specialists, "Here is what a contract is at NASA, here's how you do it." Kathleen and I went to the class, and Janet trained us. She gave me excellent training. When I became General Counsel, she called to congratulate me. We have not seen each other or talked with each other in years, so she wondered whether I would remember

her. I talked to her, and I said, “Janet, how could I forget you? You know, I learned everything from you. You gave me a foundation.”

She said, “No, you did it yourself.”

I said, “Yes, we did. You taught us, and you helped us. You got Kathleen and me started and you were there to answer questions.”

Let me share this related thought. When I had difficult interactions with folks who I had been assigned to advise on legal matters, or at times when I might not have been fully informed of the relevant facts, or might not have been aware of some nuances that others were aware of, and I clearly needed help, there were people who were willing to help me. They didn’t want to see me fail. This was a quiet cadre of people who were watching over me, “they had my back”—so to speak; who wanted—there were people who wanted to see me fail, and Kathleen. But then there were the quiet folks who would do things to help us, slip us notes, and do things behind the scenes to support us, so we had that. While I was there, I know I had those quiet angels who were all around the Center, who were helping me and helping Kathleen. That was a wonderful experience for us.

WRIGHT: Did you find those as well here, when you moved to Headquarters?

THOMPSON-KING: Yes. The very interesting thing was that the people here at HQ who I found to be the most helpful were the women in support positions. When I came to Headquarters, and I worked on the contract side of OGC, so I knew some of the secretaries because I had talked to them by phone when I worked at Goddard. When I was out at Goddard, the secretaries there told me, “You’re going to go to Headquarters, and you’re just not going to get the support down there

that you have from us.” I said, “I know, because you all are great.” And they were, they’re great out there. The Goddard administrative professionals had that Center view, common to many Center employees, that Headquarters was a foreign land. “They don’t know what they’re doing. We’re doing the real work at the Centers.”

When I came to HQ, as I said, I knew a few of the women, but I didn’t know the whole group. When I got down here, we had a large administrative support staff community back in those days. All of the women, but I’ll say particularly the African American women, were happy to see me in the contracts attorney job. One of the things the administrative support did for me, and I chuckle, because people still do it, was to refer to me as Ms. Thompson-King. The men were called Mr. O’Brien, Mr. [Edward A.] Frankel—the secretaries would do that. The African American secretaries would not refer to me by my first name. They would only call me Ms. Thompson-King, because they said they wanted other people to respect me. I said, “Oh, you don’t have to”—and they said, no. Privately, they would call me Sumara, but it was the unwritten rule that they did not refer to me by my first name when someone called me or came to see me in my office.

Back in the old NASA HQ building, we had offices on either side of very large corridors. You could probably put an office in the middle, in the corridor, because that’s how wide it was. My office was on the side of the corridor that didn’t have windows like all the other junior attorneys. The secretaries didn’t have individual offices. Two or three secretaries had desks in a space outside the office of an attorney. People constantly saw me and walked into my office and talked to me as if I were a secretary, giving me packages to give to an attorney, and I would politely say, “I think you want to give that to the secretary.” They responded with a confused look and merely said, “Oh.” Initially, it happened constantly, because HQ employees just didn’t have any

sense that the office of General Counsel at NASA would ever have an African American woman as a lawyer. “Lawyer?” I kept my door open despite such constant interruptions.

Many women who became employed in positions that had traditionally been held by only men would tell stories similar to mine. There were actions and attitudes of my colleagues that I considered disrespectful. Some of these situations that I would characterize as disrespectful include ignoring my presence or my comments, or more specifically the classic case where I would say, “I think we ought to use this type of contract,” and would be ignored, and 20 minutes later a man would say the exact same thing, and receive support and accolades for his recommendation.

I’ve been black a long time, been a woman a long time, and neither characteristic was going to change. I know that changing the actions and attitude of my colleagues would be difficult, especially if a colleague didn’t recognize any biased attitudes or behaviors of their past. I had to develop an attitude to carefully pick my battles and not respond to every slight I perceived or experienced. I also used my mother’s advice: kill them with kindness, rule them with honey. Make them get to a place where they need you. So, it took a lot of work, it took time. Some people never thought they needed me, but then, I could see when they turned the corner when I gained their trust and respect. I was also a strategist. Identify who you need to be the first person to trust you, and that person will turn everybody else.

I also know that sometimes you need to let people sink. You don’t have to tell them, “I told you so,” but you just let them sink, and then they know you were right. I had that in a case where I advised a client—it was actually at one of the Centers—I gave them advice, I explained to them why they were going to be unsuccessful. Yes, I could see the disregard for my advice: “You don’t know anything. You’re the new woman of color, you probably just got your job because you’re a ‘two-fer.’” Yes, I actually had someone say that to me when I came to HQ.

One of the best things the best thing about becoming General Counsel is that this is the first time that I was promoted where nobody told me I was a two-fer. Two-fer, meaning, you count as an EEO hire as a woman and as an African American, and that's why you got the job, because they needed to have a woman or somebody of color there. Not that I was competent, but they needed somebody, and they could get two with me.

To continue the story about this one NASA Center where the Center officials didn't want to follow my advice—I wrote my advice for them, sent it to them, and I kept a copy of it. The Center followed its desired path and a lawsuit followed. I litigated the case. Everything I advised them in my memo is what the deciding attorney said, and we lost the case. So I didn't say anything. I offered to help the Center develop a corrective action plan, and they accepted my offer. They included me in all planning activities. They wanted to talk to me before they did anything. That's why I say, sometimes you've got to lose to win. It was important not to chastise the Center if I wanted their trust and respect for the legal advice I would give in the future. It worked out for me. I had felt disrespected when the Center wouldn't follow my advice. I knew that expressing such feelings would not have been productive. I did not want to damage my credibility with the Center when I gave future advice.

However, I did have that credibility with Larry Watson at Goddard. As I shared earlier, there was a time when I expressed myself to Larry at Goddard. I was at a place in my relationship with him where I felt that I could do it. I also recognize that I was fortunate, because I have had supervisors to whom I have expressed disagreement, and they've not held it against me, because some people hold grudges and can put stumbling blocks in front of you, and I have not had supervisors who have done that. That's also what makes them champions. They may have gotten

angry with me, may have been disappointed with me, but that was a one-off, and they helped me to further my career.

That was also part of me learning and thinking about things before responding, and not getting angry with every little thing that happened, because frankly, there were too many, and I'd be a depressed soul if I had to respond to the frequent insults that I experienced when I first came to NASA Headquarters. I applied to myself the advice that I gave to the young engineer who came to talk with me about her experiences out at Goddard, "You're just going to have to deal with it." I just dealt with it, and I'd listen to the silly little jokes, and I just kept doing a good job—that I knew I would do. I just kept doing a good job.

At that time, I still felt that I couldn't make many mistakes. Some mistakes might be forgivable, but I really knew, and I worked hard not to make mistakes, because my one mistake would likely be magnified. Other people could make the same mistake, and it was just a little error. But if I made the mistake, I sense the reaction being, "Oh, we're in trouble now!" So, I recognized that, and I made very few mistakes. That was a lot of pressure, but frankly, I think my whole life I've had that pressure, because I've been the one, the only. It gets very tiring being the one and only, but over time, you learn how to deal with it, and you rely on those supporters you do have.

I think I was fortunate, because there are people who are the one and only, and they don't have any successes; I did experience successes, and I had those people who I was able to turn around. I probably would be a bitter person if I had not had successes. I think there were a lot of people who had—and when I say "a lot," there are people who are frustrated in their careers because they haven't had those successes that can turn some negative things into positives, that

will allow you to let go of those negative ones. I, fortunately, had success, had other champions, and had those angels, people around who were helping me out.

As I said, the support staff in OGC supported me, they were not against me. In some organizations, there was a lack of respect and collegiality among administrative support professionals. I did not have that experience with any of the administrative professionals in OGC. These women, they helped me. When I came to Headquarters, I was a GS-14 attorney. In those days, you would be considered for a promotion to GS-15 after being at HQ for six months and if you were a GS-14 from a Center and you had been a GS-14 for at least a year before coming to HQ. After six months, if you demonstrated the ability to perform at the GS-15 level then you earned a promotion. Barbara Webb was our office manager at that time. She monitored everybody's employment status, and she notified the General Counsel that, "It's now time to consider Sumara for a promotion." That had been the practice. In considering me for a promotion, I wasn't treated differently from how either men or attorneys with more years of serving as a GS-14 had been treated. There was fairness in this approach because all GS-14 attorneys who came into OGC, as long as they had met their one year eligibility date, they were given six months to demonstrate their performance as a GS-15.

I earned my promotion. I was there six months, and I was promoted to a GS-15. That's why I said the women also looked out for me and treated me respectfully, meaning for example, that Barbara Webb didn't forget to notify the General Counsel that I had been at HQ and should be considered for a promotion. There had been very few women who had come to Headquarters as a GS-14, so I was not certain that I would receive the same treatment as past GS-14 male attorneys had received. It was also very interesting, because the women didn't look at me as different. Men looked at me as different. Women, they knew I was different, but they were proud

of the difference. It never occurred to them that I couldn't do the job. It didn't. It didn't bother them that I was African American. My age didn't bother them. But it was just very interesting for me to note who gave me support. A lot of it came from those women who had high school diplomas, and they were happy to see someone bettering themselves and to see progression in the Agency. What I also think they hoped for is that if I could do it, they could do it, or their daughters could do it. They wanted better for themselves, so my achievements were encouraging to them. They started seeing change, but not as swiftly as they wanted.

WRIGHT: Do you have a case or a timeframe when you feel like maybe the respect from your colleagues changed, that they saw you as a very competent attorney, and no longer just the person who filled two slots on an EEO? I know you were in that contract area for a while. I think you must have a whole life full of transition, but I didn't know if there was maybe a case that you worked on that someone said, "Wow, if Sumara hadn't been a part of this, this might not have moved forward."

THOMPSON-KING: There have only been two jobs that I was selected for where my appointment to the position or my ability to perform the duties wasn't initially doubted and questioned. When I became Deputy General Counsel, and when I became General Counsel. Up to that point, every other job...

WRIGHT: Every one?

THOMPSON-KING: Every one I've had someone in the agency state to me directly or implicitly that I got the job because I was a two-fer, black and a woman. There were doubters. Some were silent and some were vocal. These were my friends and colleagues. It's interesting. Some of those colleagues would not call themselves doubters, rather they called themselves neutral. It was funny that in an agency with people who had strong opinions one way or another, I inspired so much neutrality. I surprised people. I'm not being cocky when I say I didn't surprise myself. I'm fairly good at being self-aware. I needed to be so to be successful as an attorney at NASA; I know what my strengths and weaknesses are. I know when I'm behaving badly, and I know when I'm behaving well. And I learned the importance of using feedback I received. I had confidence in my abilities that others did not.

When more millennials entered the workforce, they brought a different viewpoint. For example, the first special assistant who worked for me reflected a different life experience in this country. I was Deputy General Counsel, and I was sitting in the office which was next door to the General Counsel's office in that office [pointing to the next room]. When someone enters the suite, to the right is a lobby area where guests can be seated and to the left is the desk for the special assistant. There is an office out there [in the lobby area], for the administrative support. People would come into this suite and then come right to my office. William "BJ" Donovan who was my assistant then, would hear how people would talk to me, and he was livid. He was livid, and he would want me to respond accordingly. In his mind, someone wouldn't speak that way to the General Counsel or any other male senior official in the Agency, so why would that person think it appropriate to do that with the Deputy because she's a woman. I said, "I don't have time. I'm not worried about those people. I have to think about the people who know who I am, who know what I'm capable of, and make sure I support them. Those other folks, they'll come around."

It is now interesting to have in the Agency people who are perceptive, people who witness and acknowledge how other NASA colleagues have treated me from time to time. BJ was a young, white male who saw how people treated me, talked to me, talked down to me, didn't acknowledge me, and I appreciated that he noticed the behavior and felt comfortable talking to me about it. So I saw the world changing.

One of the attorneys, who's working still with us, came to me when she had been at the Agency a few years, and she came to talk to me about a private matter. She was thinking about her career. She said, "Do you realize you're the only woman who works full time and has children and is married?" I said, "Yes." Nobody else had noticed. Or if they had, they never said anything. She noticed. We talked about my unique status. Balancing work and family had a different meaning for me than for other women in our office. Recognizing this didn't mean I should get better treatment, but more understanding of some of the particular challenges that I might encounter. This is one of those things that's hard to explain to folks, but people do come and look at your office and make decisions: Is this a place where I want to be for my career? What I want to do? How I want to have that work-life balance? Is this a place where I'm going to be able to do that?

I was a model for her, because she was struggling with raising children, working, and trying to figure out, do I stay here at NASA? What do I do? It's now very interesting that if you look at our office complement, I'm no longer the only woman who is married and has children, and works full time. We have lots—matter of fact, I have to count them up. Before, it was only me. Now, we don't think about it anymore.

There was a time, inside and outside of the government, when a number of women lawyers didn't have families, and I wondered if they felt they couldn't have families if they wanted

successful careers. There were articles written about it. Working in the federal government makes it a little easier, I think, than working at a law firm, to have that work-life balance. It's not to say that my friends and young women who are in law firms now aren't working full time and having fulfilling careers and then also having families, but it's a little tougher, little tougher than working for the government and being able to have a better work-life balance.

It really wasn't until, like I said, [Michael C.] Mike Wholley made me Deputy General Counsel, where I received a promotion, got a new job, and someone didn't come and make the, "Oh, you got the job because you're a woman, you're black," statements to me. That was a great feeling. Then when Charlie [Bolden] made the announcement that I was the selection for General Counsel, truly, I don't think, that he focused at all on the facts that I was the first woman, and that I was the first person of color. He said, "That's not why I did it," and I know that's not why he did it. Charlie came to OGC to make the announcement. He talked about particular tasks that I completed successfully as the reason for his selection. The women in the office cried, and Charlie remembers that. I got a standing ovation that day, from my office. It was also very different for me, because I've had other promotions in this office where no one acknowledged it, my peers did not acknowledge it. The reaction this time was a huge change, and Charlie commented that, "I knew I was happy with my selection, but I didn't know you all were going to be happy with it." It caught him off guard. He remembered that the women were particularly moved.

I said, "Charlie, a lot of them, they're happy here at NASA, but they just didn't see the glass ceiling being broken." They weren't thinking about it a lot, but they were, but they weren't. But, you know, it's, like, wow, it's done. We can really do this. So, I said, "Yes, it was a big deal." Then, African Americans in the Agency who found out about my selection, they were

thrilled, because for them a glass ceiling had been broken, and they see opportunities maybe for them in their respective areas. It was a big deal for various people. It was a big deal for me.

WRIGHT: It's been a very interesting year, and your first year's not over yet. It's good that you have been in the Headquarters environment for a while, at least you could do that first. Are you beginning to make even more plans on how you want to maybe make some other transformational changes here within the legal department, not only in Headquarters, but as it goes through the Centers?

THOMPSON-KING: Yes. I've been trying to move this office in a different direction since I became Deputy, not knowing what was going to necessarily happen down the road. I started in the Deputy position, working for Mike, trying to move our office in a more 21st century direction. Like a lot of folks, email has changed our lives, changed how we communicate, but it also changed how we keep documents. Whereas we used to write memos, and we'd have a record of what a legal decision was, or legal advice, now we email our advice in an internal message. The message is between the attorney and the recipient. Is that message retained or filed somewhere for record keeping? So, if another attorney had a similar issue come up, could the first attorney say, "Oh, yes, here's the advice I gave?"

More likely the attorney would have to sort through many emails to find that message. We, in OGC, have been thinking, and I have been thinking about knowledge management and knowledge sharing. We really have to think about how we, as a legal community address these issues. Also, and now that I'm General Counsel, I've moved from how thinking about we at Headquarters share information, maintain information to how we as the broader NASA legal

community across the whole Agency, how do we share information? How do we maintain information? How do we keep it up to date?

That's one thing that we are working on, and that's very hard. I know it's not going to happen overnight. It hasn't. I've been working on it for years, and we're going to keep working on it, and we're going to get where we need to be. It's going to be very painful because I know what everyone knows about NASA culture – we have all these different locations, and everybody is wed to their way of doing things, and my way is best, and I don't want to change. Well, if we're all going to share information, somebody's got to change. We've all got to get to a place where we're all using the same system. That's going to be a challenge, but that's something we're working on. As a matter of fact, that's going to be one of the topics we talk about. We've been talking about it, but it's going to be our opening panel discussion when we have our legal conference in May 2015.

On another matter, I'm following Charlie's guidance to his leadership team, which is, take care of your people. As Deputy, and then since I've been General Counsel, I've looked at— and looking at the information in the Employee Viewpoint Survey [EVS]—how we are developing our staffs, both attorneys and administrative staff; how we're helping people to develop professionally, to develop a particular expertise, to develop leadership skills. Not everyone has a desire to be a leader or may have the skills needed for leadership. There's technical expertise that needs to be honed; we need to look at that as well. I think we need to do a better job of planning development strategies for personnel, and really think carefully about how we're using our resources to develop people, and it's not just within our own organization here at Headquarters, but across the Agency. The supervisors in the NASA legal community need to examine, not only

how we are training and developing our staffs, but how we're recognizing them and recognizing their achievements.

It's the little things. We're in the government. We don't get paid as much as those equivalent positions in the private sector, and we do not receive high paying bonuses annually or quarterly, so acknowledgments of their achievements are welcomed by civil servants. Employees like their length of service awards. They like to receive the recognition, and then be applauded for it. Specifically, I think it's important for leaders to take the time to give such recognitions. This is government service. Civil servants perform a job, but this job is service to the United States, and to NASA. People ought to be acknowledged for this service, and the time that they have put in to provide that support to the Agency and to the American people. It's not just financial recognition, it's the other types of recognition for a job well done that makes employees proud and incentivizes performance, so we're doing more to recognize the service of the attorneys and administrative support across the agency legal community.

We're also looking at how we can give people the opportunity to demonstrate their abilities. Charlie commented to me that he appreciated that Mike assigned attorneys who were experts in a particular matter to brief Charlie, and I'm following the same approach. We had to give Charlie a briefing on a particular issue yesterday. I don't give the briefing. I attended, and one of the attorneys in the office gave him the briefing. That's a person who knows all the facts.

That's one of the big changes that I've had to adjust to. During most of my NASA career, I've been a cradle-to-grave attorney, meaning I could tell you all the details from the time we started an activity to the time it ended. I knew all the details, I knew all the people. I can't do that in this job. That's not my role in this job as General Counsel; that's somebody else's role. That's

the person who needs to go and brief Charlie, the one who knows all of those details so when Charlie asks questions, he or she can respond.

One of the attorneys went to Charlie's office and gave him a briefing on this particular matter. She was thrilled to do it, because how many people get to go and brief the NASA Administrator. I mean, if you're at the Department of Commerce and you're a staff attorney, you probably rarely or never brief the General Counsel, because they're so large; and it would be even more unlikely for you to brief the Secretary of Commerce. We're a smaller Agency, but it's still a very big deal when people get to go up and give Charlie a briefing. OGC attorneys get to do that. It's developmental for the attorney. It's also our way of showcasing to Charlie that we are developing people so that when I'm not here, because I'm not going to always be here, we are demonstrating who we are developing to come behind us so they can continue to provide the legal support that this Agency needs. As we work on developing people and taking care of them, the leaders in the NASA legal community are carefully examining how we are helping our staff to develop their confidence and how we are showcasing them, so that other folks in the Agency know what skills we have, and become acquainted with the people who are go-to people for both current and future NASA legal issues.

Another mission of mine is to ensure that within the legal community we classify jobs correctly. The world has changed; we are all doing our jobs differently. The secretarial function still needs to be performed in certain offices, but then there are new skills that people are using. For instance, the secretaries here don't type memos anymore. Attorneys rarely, rarely write memos. We provide advice by email message. Attorneys will draft a few formal memos, and the administrative staff will prepare the final document and distribute it. But the majority of the administrative work, quite frankly, a lot of it is database management: putting information in

databases, pulling reports, consolidating information, pulling that information together so that when we file documents or prepare reports, we have several databases, and the administrative staff knows where to get the information so that the attorney can create the needed documents. Recently, OGC worked to have four administrative positions classified to reflect the work that is actually being done now. The administrative personnel are not office automation technologists, they're not secretaries. How should we classify them?

We worked with HR [Human Resources] to come up with the appropriate designation for our administrative support positions. We were successful in re-classifying four positions classifications. Also, OGC is working with HR to review and ensure that their position descriptions [PDs] are appropriately drafted. I am reviewing the OGC staffing and how we are doing our work, looking at whether we need to revise PDs. We're structured in a particular format. Also, I am reviewing our office structure. Over time, we have changed the structure of the office of the General Counsel, and we may need to do that again to reflect changes in the Agency's organizational structure. For instance, five years ago there was no Space Technology Mission Directorate, so I am examining whether we have attorneys in place with the appropriate skills to support this organization.

One of the things that Robert [M.] Lightfoot is doing, with the Technical Capabilities Assessment, is looking at doing things differently at NASA. He's really modeling an integrated agency approach. So, OGC has to look at an integrated approach for providing legal services not only here at Headquarters, but also at the Centers. Is there a different approach we need to take at OGC and at the Center legal offices? Maybe we need to change our office structure, or maybe we don't change the office structure, but change how we do work. I think OGC and the legal community as a whole are more interdisciplinary than we had been 10 years ago. Definitely less

stovepipes. But every once in a while, I still have to remind folks, “Okay, you got this assignment, but there’s a little issue in here that deals with intellectual property and patent rights. Did you talk to the intellectual property attorneys?”

“No,” might be the reply.

My response, “So, you need to talk to them.”

We’re trying to encourage more interdisciplinary reviews and creation of ad hoc teams to address legal issues when needed, because it’s not all just a contract issue or solely an appropriations law issue. You might have a contract issue dealing with how you fund an activity. You have a contract, the funds come for that contract, but there’s a statute directing how the agency is supposed to use the money, and it seems that our plan for use of the funds does not follow the statute. The contract attorneys, in this case, would need to talk to the general law attorneys about interpreting that legislation and how to use that money, and making sure we’re all synced up. The lawyers are doing much more of this type of coordination than we used to do.

WRIGHT: And you were very much a part of, back in 2005, when [Michael D.] Mike Griffin became Administrator and he came to the legal department and said, “We need to think of other ways that we can work with industries and develop those partnerships.” So, there is a whole new learning curve, and more of an exploratory research on how you can take the Other Transaction Authority and make it work with you and your team?

THOMPSON-KING: Yes. He had a vision; he knew what he wanted to do, so we had to figure out a way to accomplish it. That was the first time that NASA used our “other transaction” authority to provide funding to a private party to accomplish a specific goal. That started us on a new approach

to our partnerships with industry, and our work to encourage the commercialization of space exploration continues now. That was an exciting time—I'll talk about that more, if you want, but we talked about that on a previous occasion, and I actually went back and looked at the history already recorded. It's actually captured pretty well.

What's interesting is, every NASA Administrator and the Administrator's leadership team, that comes in has a vision for carrying out aeronautics and space activities. That's why I mentioned Robert Lightfoot and the Technical Capabilities Assessment. That's a very significant activity for the Agency. We are looking at how NASA is operating, because we need to be responsive to Robert, just like we were responsive to Administrator Griffin when he said, "I want to do something other than conduct an acquisition to encourage commercial activities. An acquisition requires use of the Federal Acquisition Regulation, so do something different. What else can we do?" That's when we reviewed our "other transaction" authority to look at how we could use that authority and accomplish the goal of commercializing or incentivizing the commercial development of space exploration.

I remind people that when we started developing a strategy to accomplish Griffin's goal it was in mid-2005—Griffin came to NASA in April 2005. He came in, said, "Here's what I want you to do. The budget is \$500 million. Go and do it." We had a very short timeframe to meet his expectations. We issued the solicitation in early January of 2006. I'm chuckling because I went back and looked at what was written about this activity in the book [*A New Era in Spaceflight*], and Alan [J.] Lindenmoyer refers to events during the winter of 2005. I thought, "Yes, I remember that winter of 2005 because I was on holiday leave, and I had flown down to Texas to be with my family for Christmas. Alan Lindenmoyer and I were debating with each other on several issues on the telephone, while I was in my pajamas or I was wrapping gifts during the Christmas holidays.

We were trying to get issues resolved, so that NASA could publish the announcement requesting proposals in January 2006. The Administrator came to NASA in April 2005, and proposals were to be submitted April of 2006. By August of 2006, we had identified two companies and made award to them, a little over a year after Griffin directed us to move forward. Kind of amazing.

WRIGHT: It is.

THOMPSON-KING: Also, what I now remind people about 2006 is that the guy [Elon Musk] that makes Teslas, who *Consumer Reports* ranks the Tesla as the number one recommended car to buy, wasn't in business 15 years ago. At that time, he didn't build rockets, he wasn't building cars. He was operating PayPal. SpaceX was founded in 2002, and four years later, SpaceX was selected by NASA as one of two companies to receive government funding of commercial exploration activities.

Think about the vision that President Kennedy had for NASA to get to the moon. I said, "Then think about what Mike Griffin did when he directed us to think differently. Look at where we've come in that short timeframe from when Griffin came to NASA in 2005 to where commercial space activities are now." We haven't reached Griffin's 10 year anniversary date for coming to NASA, but we're close.

During these past 10 years, there were a lot of other NASA leaders who continued to encourage the development of commercial space activities. Griffin started us, and Charlie has continued NASA's support of commercialization activities. William [H.] Gerstenmaier has been the shepherd of this entire activity. That's how the [Commercial] Cargo Program, and the

Commercial Crew Program kept moving forward. Wasn't the EFT-1 [Exploration Flight Test-1] flight in December spectacular?

WRIGHT: Yes.

THOMPSON-KING: Once launch of EFT-1 occurred, everything happened as planned, as the engineers laid out and program managers calculated what would happen, including that landing in the expected location in the Pacific Ocean. Everything was right on target. Kind of amazing. So we're going to go forward, continue with all the programs NASA has initiated: Space Launch System, Orion, Commercial Crew, and Cargo.

Yesterday, Charlie advocated extending the life of ISS [International Space Station] to 2024. This is one of his goals. NASA has had Administrators and senior leaders who've had great visions, and the NASA lawyers have worked hard to help the program officials implement those visions. The lawyers have been doing a pretty good job. It's been very exciting being in the legal office during the past 10 years, and working on multiple, new issues that have arisen as the agency executes new programs. It's never dull because frankly, we just don't know what the issue of the day is going to be.

None of us at NASA were happy when the Orbital [Sciences Corporation] launch at Wallops failed in October 2014, but it happened, and NASA is recuperating, and Orbital is working to resume flights from Wallops. I don't have any doubt that NASA's cargo re-supply program will get to a successful end point. I recognize that maybe it won't happen exactly in the timeframe that everybody wants, but it will happen. You see, I came to the agency in August 1986. *Challenger* happened in January, and when I was first at Goddard, the only thing I kept hearing

from people, and there was a lot of angst about it, “When are we going to return to flight? When are we going to return to flight?” We actually didn’t return to flight until—it was September...”

JOHNSON: It was 1988.

THOMPSON-KING: The year my first daughter was born. I was pregnant, and I was thinking, are we going to return to flight before I give birth to this baby? We did return to flight. It took longer than I think a lot of people wanted, from ’86 to ’88. But we did return to flight.

So this is just my personal opinion—I know we are going to return to flight at Wallops, but it’s going to take some time. You never know what things may occur that have the potential to slow you down, and there are other things that will speed up activities. But launches will return to Wallops. I think about all of the people who just didn’t believe that either SpaceX or Orbital were going to have successful launches and deliveries of cargo to ISS. When NASA ended Shuttle transportation, these same folks didn’t believe that NASA would have any U.S. capability to get cargo routinely up to the International Space Station. We have. Orbital and SpaceX have been successful.

WRIGHT: It’s been a very rewarding, but full, last 10 years, as far as that was.

THOMPSON-KING: Yes.

WRIGHT: We were just talking about that people feel like going to the attorneys or going to look for legal help in a federal institution can tend to slow down the progress, whereas from some of

the instances that you have shared with us, it seems like more than not that the legal team has been able to enable, to help make sure, or to certify that it is going to go forward and do it in the right way. Because the legal team works for so many different areas: procurement, contracts, international affairs, how are you able to spread all of those skills and those talents to make sure all of these areas are covered the way that they need to be?

THOMPSON-KING: The first thing that came to my mind is, do we slow down the process? I was thinking, where you stand is where you sit. So, where you stand on the question of whether lawyers slow down the process depends on where you sit. There are people, even now, today, who will tell you that the lawyers slow things down. Then there are other people who will tell you, you've got to get the lawyers involved, got to get the lawyers now so that we can move out quickly. We are all things to all people, because there are people who want it slow. They don't want to tell you they want it slow, but they're happy to let the lawyers do things, so then they don't have to make a decision. They can say, "Oh, the lawyers have it, and they're slowing it down." Now, there are people who are going to hear this and say, "Oh no, that doesn't happen." Yes it does. Yes it does.

Also, there have been times where we know the lawyers are being used as the cover for the organization, because they don't want to be the people who say no to a particular approach, or they're working something else, and they're happy to let us do what we're doing even if our legal review process takes longer than expected. They know it's going to take time, but that gives the program time to work on something else, move in a different direction, explore something, and then get to where they need to be.

Sometimes, even though an approach has been decided, there are people who still have different agendas. Sometimes what the lawyers are called on to do is corral all those different

points of view and get them to all move in the same direction. That makes life interesting. That's the counseling function, that's not legal advice, but sometimes we're the ones that need to get people together, or get them to think differently so that everyone can move in the same direction, so that we can end up in a good place for the Agency. It may not be where everybody wants to go, but we need to end up in a good place for the Agency.

I think we've earned trust within the Agency, and we have to earn trust everyday somebody new walks in the door. I have to earn trust every day a person who doesn't know me gets appointed to a new position. The current Center Director at Glenn [Research Center, Cleveland, Ohio], Jim [James M.] Free—and he'll laugh that I'm mentioning him, but I can use him, because these are all positives, good stories. I met Jim when an issue came up that was of concern to him. He and I talked through that particular issue, and then he frequently called me, as that whole situation evolved. That's how I got to know him. I think the reason that he called me is because I had given some advice that wasn't followed, and it put things in a precarious situation, so he wanted to come back to me and ask, "Are we doing things okay now, how are things going?" He and I developed a relationship over time. This is before he became the Center Director. So I don't have to prove myself to Jim. You know, he's the Center Director, so as issues come up and if I give some advice, I don't have to build trust. He knows who I am. He knows how I've worked.

Whereas Robert Lightfoot, when he became the Center Director down at Marshall [Space Flight Center, Huntsville, Alabama], he and I never worked together. I didn't know who he was. Robert, in those days, walked into the building—you couldn't tell Robert from a regular engineer at the Center, because he didn't have his suit on, he just had his shirt on, he was walking in to get his sandwich. That's how Robert is. He and I had no involvement, and I remember, I was in a meeting, it was a procurement meeting, one of our procurement strategy meetings. He was a

Center Director, the program was going to be at his Center, and I was providing my point of view, providing advice and asking some questions during the process. He had never met me before. I had not met him. He was trying to figure out if I really knew what I was talking about, or was I just being a lawyer. “Do you really need to ask these questions, do you need to know?” I later found out he was appreciative of the questions I asked, but he was getting to know me. I think starting there, and through some other things, he developed a trust in me.

I have to do that with everyone. I have to get them to feel that I’m listening to them, that I’m going to help them to achieve what they want to achieve. Some people want me to tell them what they want to hear, but they know I’m not going to tell them what they want to hear. They have to understand, I’m going to tell them and advise them on what they can, what they can’t do, and help them to get where they need to go. That’s really our effort in here, is to help you get where you need to go. It may not be the way you want to get there, but we know what you’re trying to accomplish, so let us help you. But that—you really have to have trust that we are there for that purpose, not to slow you down.

There was a situation down at Marshall. I laugh at this particular individual, an engineer down there. When he heard that the attorney from Headquarters and the procurement officer, but mostly it was the attorney at Headquarters that concerned him, were coming down to talk with them about this particular activity—oh my gosh, every time I opened my mouth, his eyes rolled. Every time. He just—“Lawyers are going to slow us down. They’re going to ask questions. We’ve got to explain this. They’re creating problems that don’t exist.” I didn’t go home. We stayed. We were there for about a week. As time went on, he began to trust, and then I remember there was this moment where no one in the room was understanding what he was saying, and I

said, “Wait, here’s what he’s saying.” When you stick with engineers for a while, you begin to talk their lingo. I explained it back.

He goes, “That’s it!”

I said, “But that’s my job, that’s what I need to do. I need to get to a place where I understand you, where you’re going to trust me that when I tell you no, this is really not the direction we need to go in, here’s how we can get there, you come with me.”

That’s what makes life interesting and makes life frustrating, because there are times where we all come in and close our door and we pound the table because people aren’t listening to us, or they accuse us of having ulterior motives. But I think what we have tried to do is build that trust across the Agency, and be reliable and have our advice withstand scrutiny. While we may—there are some things we probably do slow down, and we’re all not perfect, because there are also some attorneys who maybe just don’t get it, and they might be looking at something very legalistically, and that might be slowing the process down. Well, that’s where I get involved. I’ve had those conversations with attorneys, “Yes, I get it. You’re legally right, but that’s not going to help that program. This is how much money they have to spend, this is the timeframe, here’s what they need to do. The way they want to do it—no. They can’t do it that way, you’re absolutely right. No, I know, it’s a stupid question—got it. You feel better now? You’re right.”

So, now let’s figure out how we can help them get to the place where they need to be. Okay, maybe they can’t spend the full \$100,000 that they have; maybe they can only spend 50, because there’s some kind of restriction. But let’s help them do that. Let’s figure out what we can do. Sometimes, that’s what I have to do as the leader, is to come in and say, “Yes, you’re right, but we need to look at this differently.” I need to help them look at things differently, because those people are going to be the people who are going to be in line, who we’re training to maybe

become General Counsel one day, who they're going to have to train somebody else. No, everyone isn't of the same mindset, but we have to work to get people to the same place.

WRIGHT: You mentioned earlier that you have a legal conference coming up in May. Is that part of your message that you want to share with your complete legal team that a closer relationship, or more communication is needed? Or what are some of the messages that you want to be the expectations that you're going to lay out with the teams? You're not just here at Headquarters, but you're responsible for, if I'm correct, for all the attorneys and for all the legal teams that are throughout the Centers as well.

THOMPSON-KING: Yes. I think our approach to providing legal services made a significant shift in 2002 when Sean O'Keefe came in [as Administrator], and Paul [G.] Pastorek became the General Counsel. The reason I say we made a shift then is that he came in and said, "You're too stove-piped. We all need to communicate with each other. You're stove-piped within Headquarters, within each Center. We need to have—we came up with this phrase—we need to have a 'one NASA' approach to things." We started shifting then, and I think we shifted, and we're working on it every day, to that message. Maybe we don't use the phrase "one NASA" anymore, but we talk about, and we've been talking about, and I'm going to continue to talk about getting consistency, having consistency across the Agency.

It is very difficult to have someone come in and say, well—let me give you the example about an issue that came up. When a contractor submits a proposal, and doesn't get an award, we provide a, "debriefing," where we tell them what their strengths were, weaknesses; it's a way of helping them to understand what their weaknesses were, so they can write a better proposal next

time. That's the purpose of a debriefing. There are nine NASA locations; every location was doing that, performing that debriefing differently.

At one location, you would have the company come in and they would be told, "We're going to tell you everything," and the person from NASA would read off a sheet of paper. If that company said, "Could we have a copy of what you read?" "No." And they'd read. Then, you'd have another Center, same type of debriefing activity, they'd just answer questions, if you asked them, if the company came in and asked. Then, you'd be at another Center, where they might take the charts that were presented during the selection briefing for that company, and they'd take those charts and sanitize them a little bit, but then they would present the information.

So, you'd have a company—I'm just using Lockheed [as an example]. Lockheed goes to three different Centers, gets three different ways of getting a debriefing. Why is each Center doing it differently? I've seen my charts and I see the numbers and I see the analysis from this Center, but then over here, you're going to read it to me and not give it to me, and then this other Center is just going to answer questions, if I happen to ask the right questions.

So, we started a process of developing a debriefing guide so that there would be more consistent debriefings across the Agency. Then, what we've had to do, so we need to go back periodically and say, "Hey, are we still following this? Are we still doing this?" Even though you establish something, you still have to go back and make sure you're still doing it, because new people come in, or there may be a reason to change it. So, one Center may change it, because you know, at NASA, we've set something in place, doesn't mean everybody is following it the same way. If you made a change, well, why have you made a change? What have you learned that you might want to share with everybody else? We're trying to do that, and make sure that we maintain

consistency, but if we have to change, let's make the change so that everybody is changing in the same way.

WRIGHT: You mentioned, too, just in the years you've been here, the way that we've done work has changed from memos, and secretaries typing those memos and documents, and so forth, and we've also had an explosion of social media and how NASA presents itself on a real-time, continual-time basis. How is the legal department working with that, and all these nuances of trying to make sure that NASA is shared with the world, but yet done in a way that is representative of the legal matters that have to be taken care of?

THOMPSON-KING: We're struggling, like everyone else. We were worried when this whole social media thing came out, because the people, the Millennials [generation], who are used to social media, they share everything. They share, share, share. There's no filter. That would be my perception of it. So, we deal with some sensitive things here. We don't share. Not sharing has a purpose. There are times that you need to maintain that confidentiality. But then there is a reason for sharing.

We've got to find that right balance. The people who are comfortable using social media, we need them to talk with those of us who aren't comfortable using social media, and we need to figure out what the limits are that we should place. We need to be realistic about that, because we can't tell people, "Oh, absolutely no social media," because that was the initial going in. No tweeting, no blogs. If a NASA blogger starts, who's reading what he or she is blogging? How do we know that's accurate information? Is it on a NASA website? The lawyers, we did have that

concern. Well, then we have to relax. We can't police and control everything. Let's look at this; we have to observe as things evolve, and then give advice as we see, maybe, trends emerging.

I think mostly, the broad advice that we give, or the one piece of advice with social media is, if it is something that's confidential, just because you have social media, it doesn't mean it's a medium in which you should now be able to share this information. If you're working on the Commercial Crew Source Evaluation Board [SEB], and you're reading proposals, you don't go out and share with the world what's in those proposals. As a matter of fact, prior to social media, SEB members wouldn't think about telling people, by sending a tweet, "Hey, I'm sitting on the commercial crew SEB." With the use of social media, the lawyers have to remind or advise SEB members not to share acquisition sensitive information.

We give that guidance, but it has been a challenge. Sometimes, you have to wait for things, you have to let things happen, and then the rules or guidance develops as things occur, when you see where you need to step in and where you don't need to step in. Some of that, we just don't know. We can create worry. Lawyers can create worry for anything. We can, but sometimes we need to step back and let's let the situation emerge, and then when we're approached to offer advice, we offer advice. Then there are other times when we notice things happening, we're paying attention and we say, "Hey, we need to step in and alert them to something."

For instance, what's in the news today? The former Secretary of State's [Hillary Clinton] emails. No indication that there's any problem at NASA, but it might be a good idea to send out a note to everybody reminding them that if you're conducting official business, use official government email. Just send out that note. Now, some people might react and say, "Why are you doing that? That's Hillary Clinton. She's over at the State Department. That's not us. Why are

we doing that?” Then, there are other people in the Agency who will say, “Yes, that might be a good idea to have a reminder.”

We’re probably going to send something out, but I know there are some folks who are saying, “Not necessary. Why are you doing it? You’re going to create a problem that isn’t there.” We’re offering the advice, and if we get one of our senior leaders saying, “No, don’t do it,” we won’t. There have been some times where I have received guidance that we don’t want to further address an issue, and that’s fine. We abide by that.

WRIGHT: Your clients are far and wide, or the people that you interact with, because it’s not just internal matters that you deal with. You have so many external folks, such as the GAO [Government Accountability Office] and international partners, and of course Congress. How do you prepare the NASA people that you are representing or working with to deal with the outside community, because things are much different than what’s going on inside of here? How does your team help them?

THOMPSON-KING: My advice generally, in approach to this, is that we do better when we have a single point of contact. For instance, if we have an inquiry from the [Capitol] Hill, it’s better, than getting a response from five different Centers. Let’s think about the Space Launch System. Marshall’s doing something, Stennis [Space Center, Mississippi] has the test stands, it’s going to launch at Kennedy, there’s Michoud [Assembly Facility, New Orleans, Louisiana]. So, we get a question that comes in, who is going to answer it? One of the things I try and advise folks if there’s a legal issue that comes up, we’re to speak with one voice, so let’s also funnel everything through one person, or a group of people, so that we are all consistent in how we’re communicating.

Then, what we do is we want to identify the person who is the most capable of responding to the inquiry, both with the factual knowledge, but also with the judgment of how to handle inquiries. Responding to a staffer is very different than responding to a reporter calling in about a matter, or a citizen who's filed a FOIA [Freedom of Information Act] request. We have different skill levels within the attorneys; I would not send a two-week attorney or a one-year attorney who's working at the Center up to the Hill to talk to staffers and explain what we're doing on the Space Launch System. I have attorneys who have been working this for years, who are litigators, who've worked with external stakeholders, who know how to talk and how to represent the Agency. That's who I would send.

Everyone has their first time—their first time to represent the agency to outsiders, whether they are members of Congress, Hill staffers, Department of Justice attorneys, federal court judges or administrative judges. If you're sending someone to meet with Hill staffers for the first time, you would allow that junior attorney to accompany a senior attorney. For example, to address a contracts question, you would send the Associate General Counsel for contracts to be the primary agency representative and the junior attorney would be the companion. Now, the Associate General Counsel is going to be the spokesperson, but that other attorney gets to observe how the communication is done, what the style is, what questions you answer, how you deal with it. If that attorney doesn't go with the Associate General Counsel, how will that attorney ever learn?

That's one of the other things, I guess, I've been stressing to people is we shouldn't have single points of failure. One of the ways that you avoid that is, you bring somebody along with you. You can use it as a training opportunity. Maybe that's the first time that that attorney has ever gone up and talked with somebody on the Hill. Maybe the next time the Associate General

Counsel doesn't go; you just send that attorney. But you wouldn't send that attorney up to the Hill the first time on their own.

So, you think through those things. As senior agency attorneys, we also work to make sure we're developing a group of people. That's why it was important for me to take an attorney up the hill to brief Charlie. Part of that was that individual had briefed folks outside the Agency, so now, if an issue came up, I would feel comfortable sending her up to the Hill to talk to the staffers about a particular subject.

WRIGHT: Do you have a memorable first time that you think of when you think back to the first time you had to do one of the assignments you're sending other attorneys to do?

THOMPSON-KING: Litigating my first procurement protest and going to meet with Congressional staff were memorable firsts. On my first Hill visit, there were a group of us. It wasn't just attorneys, it was also program folks, because the program folks know what's going on with the program, and sometimes they can speak with the program knowledge and authority that I as an attorney can't speak with. I learned that from one of my visits. I also learned how to appropriately respond to Congressional staff inquiries. Because one of the staffers has asked you a question, you do have to answer it, but how you answer it is important. I learned how to answer questions, frankly, from the program people who also were at the meeting I learned that if a question wasn't clear to you, ask and sometimes even insist on a clarification so that you understand the question and give an accurate response. That's a judgment and a nuance you learn, but you learn that by going with someone else who's had that experience. Also, I learned that sometimes it may be

beneficial for me to shape the question that a staffer is asking, so that I could provide an accurate answer that was helpful to NASA.

Next, I learned how to litigate cases. I remember I came to NASA Headquarters, and I was immediately assigned the duty of litigating protests. A Center attorney and I actually went before an adjudicator and presented our case. I was very inexperienced. Very inexperienced. I think I was on my third case, so I was still feeling my way through how to manage the case. I was first chair, meaning that I was the lead attorney for NASA because I was the Headquarters attorney. Second chair was the field Center attorneys, who had much more experience than I did. What I remember about him is, he clearly had more experience than I did, but he never acted in a way that undermined me or made me feel that I wasn't first chair. I remember there was a question—because it's true, you don't ask a question that you don't know the answer to. I did. But it was appropriate in this case for me to ask such a question. The witness was criticizing something NASA had done; this was an expert witness. This witness was wrong; I knew the witness was wrong in asserting that NASA didn't follow Agency guidance. I said to my counsel, "I don't think he read the guidance that we provided. If he had read that guidance, he would know that what he said was wrong."

It was one of those questions where I didn't know how he was going to answer it, but I knew that either way he answered it was going to be good for us. If I asked him and he said, "No, I didn't read it," then how could he could he say NASA didn't follow the guidance? Or, if he says, "Yes, I read it," and I point to him the page, saying "I thought you read this, but this states the opposite of what you said it said"—so, that was one of those I didn't know how he was going to answer, but I assessed no matter what he said, we were going to prove our point effectively. When I asked him the question, he said, "No, I didn't read it." It was one of the facts that helped us to

win our case. So I was uncomfortable, but I had to learn to make that decision quickly. I had written a note to my co-counsel, “Should I?” and he advised, “Ask.” That was helpful, to have him there. You have to think quickly. I learned that that day.

WRIGHT: I know your career is not over here, it’s just really actually beginning in a whole new light. But reflecting back on the years, what do you feel is probably the most valuable lesson you’ve learned through this time period? Or, a valuable lesson that you’ve learned?

THOMPSON-KING: Oh, my goodness, there are just so many. I think probably what I told you at the beginning of this conversation about having a champion. I would not be where I am if I didn’t have somebody opening doors for me. I also think that you have a responsibility when you then move into a leadership position, to open doors for other people. There are folks who don’t understand that, that one responsibility of a NASA leader is creating opportunities for others, and that’s part of what Charlie talks about when he says “taking care of people.” I’m also finding that I’m having to guide the new leaders I supervise in that direction, and say that to them. As a leader at NASA, you’re not here just to do the work and provide legal advice. You’re here to guide people and to develop them. For some new leaders in the legal community, when you’ve been the attorney who’s been giving the advice and working the issue, it’s hard to stop doing that, let somebody else do it, and you guide the other person in giving the legal advice and working the issue. That’s why it’s important to have champions, and for you to be a champion for somebody else, because that’s the only way that this is going to work.

Then, it’s being honest. Being honest with people. Being truthful. Having integrity. In our EVS rating, we received 100 percent rating—Mike was here—for your belief in the honesty

and integrity of your leaders. That's important. People may not like the decision that you make, but if they think you're being honest, and if you're acting with integrity, they'll stick with you and they'll trust you.

There are some people in the Agency that I've met that are slick. I'll use that word. People see through that and then they don't trust you, and then they're nervous about it. I recommend that people not be that type of person. I've also seen what those people, you have that experience where your career can crash. It will catch up with you. It's important to be a person of honesty and integrity, and do your job. Do your job well. Be competent, because there are people who want promotions, but don't want to do the work to get them. It's amazing to me, but there are people out there. I have to say this, and I've said this to folks: be competent at what you do.

In Prince George's County, where I live, our county executive, Rushern [L.] Baker, he was in law school when a friend of mine was in dental school. He came to her when she started practicing, and she told me that she asked him, "Oh, you know a whole bunch of dentists, why did you come to me?"

He said, "Because you studied." He knew. "You studied. I think you're competent. I know what the others were doing!" So people notice that about you; when you demonstrate competence, the word gets around. People want you. So, be competent.

WRIGHT: That's a good one.

THOMPSON-KING: Yes.

WRIGHT: I'm going to ask Sandra, do you have some questions?

JOHNSON: Yes, I just had a couple. I was thinking about when you were talking about those early years, and when you first started college, and like you said, you felt like you were under a microscope, because you stood out in a crowd, and people were more aware of your successes and your failures. That takes a lot of strength, inner strength, to get through some of those situations. As you said, before you came to this position and the one right before, you felt like you had to continually prove yourself over and over. Where do you think that strength came from, and what would you tell someone that was starting out, and that may have those same issues? What would you tell them to help them to have that internal strength to get through those types of situations?

THOMPSON-KING: Remind them of what they did to get where they are. You're capable. You're here; you're capable. It doesn't mean you're perfect, and it doesn't mean you won't fail, but there is that adage that you have to pick yourself up when you fall down. You don't stay down, you get back up and you try it again. You keep trying it. I shared with people that I failed the bar exam twice before I finally passed. I said, "I must have failed that so I could tell people this story now, to give them encouragement." And I do tell it; I have told this story to give people encouragement. I knew I was capable, but something was happening, and I failed the bar twice. But my husband had faith in me. I had faith in myself, but I had somebody else who supported me. So, it's good to have someone else support you. It's good to find a support system, have a support system. You need it. Then, have faith in yourself, and pick yourself up when you fall. It will get better.

When I was in law school, I boo-hoed in one of my professor's offices. I cried, because I said, "I'm never going to find a job. I'm never going to have a career," because I had gone on interviews and I wasn't getting any job offers. I said, "My grades aren't what they should be."

He responded, “Okay, here take a tissue.” And he said, “Sumara, all you need is that first job. You’re going to get that first job, and after you get the first job, no one is ever going to ask you again what your grades were in law school, and you’ll demonstrate your abilities when you get that first job.”

I heard him, but thought to myself, “Really? That’s what you have to say to me? That’s your advice?” Guess what? He was absolutely right.

I got my first job after law school. It took me a while to pass the bar, but I passed it, and then I remember I drafted and finalized a memorandum while the General Counsel was away on vacation. The more experienced attorneys had drafted several different memoranda. When the General Counsel returned, she called me into her office, and she was holding the document that I drafted. She said, “I didn’t know that you had prepared this. I thought one of the other senior attorneys did this memo. You did this. You did a really good job.”

“Thank you,” I said. Her remarks inspired me and encouraged me. I thought to myself, “Oh, I really do know how to write well.” I recalled that it took me a long time to get that first job, and then I didn’t pass the bar, so I was having doubts. But that day I received praise and encouragement from the General Counsel. Shortly thereafter, when I applied for a job at Goddard, she was the one that told Larry, “I am going to a new job and if I could, I would hire Sumara and take her with me.” The funny thing is, Larry never asked me what my grade point average was at law school. So I thought back to Professor Jeffrey Bauman who said, “They’re not going to ask you what your grade point average was; they’re going to look at what you did in your previous job.” He was right. It was my writing not my grades that got me my next job—my job at Goddard.

JOHNSON: You mentioned a lot of people that have helped you along the way, and you've called some of these people "your quiet angels." What opportunities have you had to do those same things, and have you made a point of doing that throughout your career? Maybe in the background, just helping someone along, other than, as you mentioned, as someone that's the head here, there are people under you, you have to keep promoting them. But other instances of having those opportunities to do that?

THOMPSON-KING: Many. I am fortunate in that I've had many opportunities to mentor, counsel, advise, and promote others. One of the reasons I've had these opportunities is that I have been the lone woman and the lone African American giving a presentation or leading a training class; participating in meetings; serving on interview panels; and working in a legal office. There have been other women across the Agency in different careers who have reached out to me, asking, "May I come talk to you?" Or, African Americans or Latina women who have come in and said, "Can I just come talk to you?" So, there have been moments when my NASA colleagues have needed to talk to somebody to get some advice, to make a complaint, or just to have me be a sounding board for an idea. I also think because I'm a lawyer, some colleagues feel they can share personal matters with me that I'm not going to share with everybody else. There are times where I've felt like I've been the therapist at work all day. I have been, because those folks don't have anybody else they can talk to, that they feel comfortable talking to.

We've had some training classes at NASA where we talk about the unwritten rules of an organization, so sometimes I have to talk to people about those unwritten rules that they need to follow. I had somebody who gave me an unwritten rule, who said to me, "You need to make sure your hair looks good every day." Now, I wouldn't want my supervisor to tell me that. But there

was a colleague I had, who said, “You need to look a little bit more professional so people will take you seriously.” I came to work, kind of pulling my hair back in a ponytail, because that was an easy thing to do, and I had children to get to school each morning. She advised, “Spruce yourself up a little bit. You will project yourself differently to people.”

So, somebody told me that advice on an “unwritten rule,” and I have had similar conversations with people that I have counseled. In one case I had to tell a colleague that certain necklines are not appropriate for the workplace, especially if you want to progress in your career. In another instance, I participated in MLLP [Mid-Level Leader Program], I was one of the interviewers in MLLP. One of the young women we interviewed indicated that someone told her along the way that she giggled too much. She said, “I stopped giggling. It wasn’t cute. It wasn’t professional.”

There have been times where I felt comfortable giving this type of advice to some people and other times when it was hard. Those are little, secret things. Sometimes we need to do the hard thing, because it will help the recipient, like telling someone they need to use deodorant. Inadequate personal hygiene can ruin your career. This may seem petty, but in reality, people will not want to be in the room with you, people will not talk to you, they have a different point of view about you. That simple thing to change, but if no one ever gives you the needed advice, you may not know what about you bothers others. That’s a very hard thing to go into someone’s office, and to talk to them about their personal habits. But I know that if you don’t, that’s a person that’s going to go off the rails, and you’re going to lose a very talented person. And, it’s all because no one was going to, I guess, go against protocol. But, I have seen, particularly being a woman and being African American, I have to say these things to some people, because, quite candidly, if you

are not part of the mainstream, your difference will be magnified, so you need to take care of these things. Sometimes I have felt that I have had to tell people things.

There was a person who I talked to about their personal habits. It's very interesting because one of their colleagues came to me, totally independently, very positive. The comments before had been negative, negative, negative about the person's performance. The person changed their way of dress. Now, comments about this individual are positive, positive, positive. The only thing that changed was the wardrobe. That's one of those things that you don't necessarily hear when you go to training classes, and I wouldn't necessarily have talked about, but sometimes I have found that I need to talk about those unwritten type of rules. Even saying, "Good morning" to people when you come in the morning. Look people in the eye and say, "Good morning."

You want to be successful? There's a secretary that you walk past every day, you never acknowledge her, never say anything. Try coming in and all you have to say is, "Good morning. How was your weekend?" It will change your life. You will become the star of the office.

Over time, I have found that it's more those little things you would think people would know, but they don't. Then you realize folks won't tell them, and then they'll hold it against them.

JOHNSON: It's part of that being self-aware that you mentioned earlier, too. The only other question I had, being from Lufkin [Texas] and in that area, and of course when the *Columbia* [STS-107] accident happened, being a part of the NASA family, I was just curious about if you traveled down to East Texas and if you did anything during that time period, in an official NASA capacity, or even as a former local community person?

THOMPSON-KING: All remote. All of my activity was remote. We sent other people down. The day that it happened, that Saturday morning, I had gotten up out of bed, and like a lot of folks, I think I had the radio on, because I knew the shuttle was going to land, but I turned the radio off, and I had to be someplace that morning. Then my phone started ringing. That's when I found out. The caller said, "It's not landed."

I said, "What do you mean, it's not landed?"

It's a friend of mine, she said, "It's not landed." I turned on the TV, and I just sat there. She asked, "What's wrong?"

I said, "Something's wrong, because it's supposed to be on the ground by now." I knew then, something bad had happened, I just didn't know where or what. I guess I started hearing that it had gone down someplace over Texas. I don't remember how I got that, if it was talking to NASA people or listening to TV. But at some point I knew about where it might have gone down, and I realized the area was my hometown.

I called my aunt, and she said, "Yeah, we heard this huge noise." She was described it, like thunder, roaring.

I said, "Do not go outside your house. Don't touch anything, don't pick up anything. Don't get a souvenir, nothing." I don't need my family, collecting government-owned property—"Don't touch anything! Tell everybody. When you get on your party line, tell everybody, don't touch anything, don't do anything, and don't go near where it may be. As much as you can, tell that to everybody down there."

I started calling my family members and just passing that message, don't touch anything, don't do anything, call me if you see anything, or whatever. Much of the debris landed more towards Nacogdoches, which is 20 miles away, and then in the Sabine River and Lake

Nacogdoches. What I was trying to explain to NASA people was that this area was forested, had many bodies of water and was well-populated. People were so perplexed, because they asked, “How do you know this?”

I said, “Your perception of Texas is that it all looks like El Paso. This is East Texas. It’s the piney woods.” I was describing it to them. “In certain parts of Texas, San Augustine, Texas, you could walk from San Augustine into Louisiana. We’re that close. There’s water there, and shuttle parts may be in the water, because there are lakes, reservoirs, and rivers. There are trees, woods. It’s not a desert where you’re just going to see things from the air.” I was describing that to people, because folks were trying to figure out what to do. So I made a little contribution to the planning discussion about the legal support to be provided.

“You’re going to have to approach this differently,” I recommended, “and you are going to have to send people into the area, and we’re definitely going to have to send some attorneys to East Texas, so that we could respond more timely to the legal issues that were likely to arise.”

I came to NASA Headquarters that Saturday. The speed camera on Kenilworth Ave. was functioning that day. My daughters, who live in Texas now, complain about the many speed cameras now in DC. In 2003, the one DC speed camera on the highway that day caught me. I was trying to get to work, and I got a ticket. A lot of us got tickets that day from that speed camera. When we got here, Paul Pastorek, the General Counsel at that time, was not here. He was at KSC with the NASA Administrator, to greet the *Columbia* astronauts when they landed. Throughout the day, Paul communicated with those of us who came to work about what we should do. NASA had not had an accident since *Challenger*.

In some ways, in my opinion, NASA could be a little naïve. We weren’t prepared to respond in a well-planned way to the public attention and scrutiny that the Agency received. We

were a little better prepared for how to deal with the second one, but we really weren't, because we tended to think that the risk of another accident had been reduced, because we're being thoughtful and careful in making launch decisions. We knew what the risks were, but we still, I think, just weren't ready to deal with the public inquiry about how NASA made operational decisions and how we conducted our accident investigations. But I think we had great leaders in place, so the things that we had mapped out in a plan—we did have a plan, but I don't think it was fully updated and ready for what we then faced with *Columbia*, so, there was still a lot of adjustments, and things we had to really think through.

The world had changed since Challenger, because of social media. The Internet. People were sharing information. We had cell phones. Everybody had a cell phone. Everybody had cameras. So, that made *Columbia* really different. Then, you had a whole new group of people, like me in leadership positions, I was acting at that time. I was not the Associate General Counsel. I was the Acting Associate General Counsel for Contracts.

As OGC developed and implemented its plan for providing legal support, we took a practical approach for using our available agency resources wisely. Having me travel to Lufkin, because I know the area, wasn't necessarily the best use of my skills. We had attorney at JSC. Those were the attorneys that we sent to East Texas to provide on the ground legal support. OGC was in constant communication with them about how to support the different activities that were going on there, and to provide counsel on a myriad of issues.

We also identified particular attorneys from other NASA Centers to work specific issues, from authority to use government funds to acquire certain supplies to reviewing statements NASA released to the media. The Chief Counsel at Glenn Research Center became Counsel to the *Columbia* Accident Investigation Board. So, we identified people to take on specific tasks. Know

your role. My job was to be the Acting Associate General Counsel. I needed to continue to support the procurement activities of other agency programs, while also providing guidance on issues related to specific contract arrangements that were headed to support the Shuttle recovery activities.

My other important responsibility was to address the legal questions that arose about the performance of various shuttle contractors and subcontractors. Was it something in the engine? Who is the problem? Where is the problem? That meant sending other people to East Texas. The attorneys who went to East Texas were our eyes and ears, they helped to identify issues. Most of us were not NASA employees when *Challenger* was lost, so legal issues arose that we had no experience working and resolving. That lack of experience strengthened our resolve to do our best work. A lot of it was not so much legal work, but counseling. Helping people think through problems, how to address things, how to get things done quickly.

It was a very busy time. But it was also interesting that because of the leadership that we had in our General Counsel at that time, we were united, and we looked to him for guidance. I have to say we followed him. So, we weren't getting people who would one-off. He wanted, "Clear and consistent legal advice related to the *Columbia* matters to come from all legal offices across the Agency," he told us. "Let's make sure we coordinate all our efforts and our advice." I think we were very good about doing that during that time.

My family would frequently report to me about activities going on there. My cousin owned a restaurant in Lufkin where many NASA people frequently dined. Many of my NASA colleagues would tell me they went to my cousin's restaurant. Lufkin was very proud that they had facilities that could accommodate the folks who were coming into the area, and that Lufkin could be a headquarters for the operation double the entire population of Lufkin, Texas can fit into the football

stadium here in Washington on a Sunday, but Lufkin had the largest meeting facility nearby, it had a convention center. That's what was used. Lufkin had restaurants. There's a hospital there. Lufkin had a lot of infrastructure and services that weren't as plentiful in Nacogdoches. That's why it was selected. It's also on Highway 59, a straight path into Houston. The community was happy to be helpful to the Agency. Not under those circumstances, but they were happy that they could provide the needed resources. The Lufkinites were very proud of their service, and I was very proud of the community for doing that.

JOHNSON: Thank you.

WRIGHT: Well, we know we could stay all day, but we can close for now.

THOMPSON-KING: Okay.

[End of interview]