LASEWICZ: This is an oral history interview with Winnie, IBM Executive Assistant, conducted August 5, 2003, by IBM Corporate Archivist, Paul Lasewicz. Welcome and thank you for coming.

WINNIE: Thank you, Paul.

LASEWICZ: Can we start off talking about your professional background a little bit? What is your field study, and why did you choose this field to work in?

WINNIE: My field of study is electronic engineering. I chose that field because I really wanted to be part of the new technology be developed, part of the excitement of the IT industry.

LASEWICZ: What did you find so interesting about this field? Why did you want to be a part of it?

WINNIE: Technology today is very exciting because, more and more, it is enabling people to solve problems. Technology also enables people to do things that they could never imagine doing before.

LASEWICZ: Anything in particular catch your eye? Any particular example that pointed you in this direction?

WINNIE: I think at the time when I decided to go into electronic engineering, it was the very start of the computer industry.

And I was just fascinated, -- you can actually put in numbers and the computer can calculate everything for you and you write about something, the computer can just print it out, it can do graphics. I was just so amazed by all the tasks the computer can do versus [what] I had to do all of them by hand myself before in grade school. So, it was a big change.

LASEWICZ: Can you briefly describe your early experiences in science and technology?

WINNIE: I think when I started with science and technology; I remember it was very different from where we are today.

In the universities, we have courses. We actually learn how to design the circuit board and to actually use assembler language which is the very fundamental level of language to build a computer -- to tell the computer what to do.
Putting together the code yourself and actually see the computer working and give instruction, do the tasks you want to do.

For example, control traffic lights, to understand the certain instructions. It's fascinating. So, I think there are a lot of challenges but also a lot of excitement as I started my career and a lot of the amazing things just keep you going and you want to learn more.

LASEWICZ: When did you decide or when did it occur to you that you wanted to be in the field of engineering?

WINNIE: I think it was when I was probably in seventh, eighth grade, and probably like 12, 13 years old.

LASEWICZ: What exactly do you remember? Was there a eureka moment when you just said, wow, this is it, this is something that really clicks with me and resonates with me.

WINNIE: I think I had some interest always in the math and science, but I am also interested in other things. You know, dance and literature.

But my family also had a lot of influence on me and my teachers had influence on me. … I think the key point is with all the input, all the information, [I] got a lot of encouragement to study math and science -- [it] will give me a core skill which I can utilize over my lifetime.
Also, the excitement I see of what technology can do, made me just very much want to learn and to go to that field.

And I was fascinated by people, astronauts [LAUGHTER] doing the unimaginable, amazing things that people do in science and engineering field.

LASEWICZ: You were talking about the influence that your family and your teachers had. Could you go into that a little bit more? Were any of your parents in the field themselves or were they scientifically inclined?

WINNIE: Well, my mother is a very big influence in my life. She was a doctor and I think originally she tried to encourage me to be a doctor, but I really don't have an interest in that.

So, my mother told me that if I don't want to be a doctor, then I should be an engineer or scientist because I will have a core skill which I can use and I can always use regardless what age I am, regardless which field I am in. So, she was a great influence.

And also, I had a good support network. My father and other family members, teachers who also confirmed the same message delivered to me. So, I think I got a lot of encouragement from people around me. It's a good supporting environment.

LASEWICZ: Once you got into it and started studying it and then later working in the field, did it turn out to be

different than what you had originally anticipated? Or was it pretty much the same?

WINNIE: I think pretty much the same. I did probably modify in the sense that I was very much interested in science, research type of work in the beginning as it fascinated me. But, as I get into the field I was more focused on engineering. So, I found myself to be very [interested] in having hands on experience in solving problems. So, that's why I studied engineering.

LASEWICZ: So, here you are, you're working as an engineer. Can you talk a little bit about the things that you've done and your work history to this point?

WINNIE: Yes. I studied with engineers. I worked several years, actually part in technical colleges. I led a few projects with the students and also led projects in different corporations. I also, myself, have worked on projects, designed traffic control systems. It's very interesting.

We drive every day, look at the lights change, green, yellow, but there's actually a lot of engineering to it. You know, we put on sensors, actually underground, to test how much traffic comes through to make sure people in the one way of traffic do not wait too long -- if a lot cars in

one direction versus the other -- and how the lights should change control.

So, we designed a control system, and experimented to make sure we get the proper traffic control system in place. So, I think that's something very practical for daily life, which you can improve and make it very interesting.

LASEWICZ: For somebody that's stuck in traffic a lot, I do appreciate your efforts there on my behalf there. What do you do now in your job as an engineer or working in the field of technology?

WINNIE: Right now, I don't design things anymore. Actually, I moved today to work in the business field. I have worked in various assignments. But engineering has always been an area which related to my work.

I may not be in the lab anymore, but I do a lot of the contract negotiations, I am responsible for some of the projects and a lot of the activities related to the engineering, design schedule etc., that we need to work with.

So, even though I am not specifically working at the lab anymore, I am still very much involved in the engineering field and the training definitely helped me a lot to really make better business decisions.

LASEWICZ: Are there any particular skills that you received during your training that are relevant that you can point to in the business side?

WINNIE: Yes, I think first of all it is really the analytical skill, the skill you gain when you study math, study science that enables you to [look in the way] be very logical to analyze the situation and solving a problem. That's in general.

Very specifically, I think because I studied electronic engineering, I understand a lot of the issues related to a project or related to engineers. So, when I negotiate with different business partners or when I manage a project, it's a very good common language with the engineers.

As well, in the negotiations I very much know what are the technologies, what is the level of difficulties, what can be done or cannot be done. So, those all help me regardless of what job I have, what project I am on.

LASEWICZ: It looks like you have foot on both the technical side and the business side of working in a company.

WINNIE: Yes.

LASEWICZ: What do you find most satisfying about that?

WINNIE: I find the most satisfying is to be able to use my technical knowledge as well as my business knowledge and then combine them to make a contribution.

So, it's solving a problem from the technical sense and as well as solving a business problem either using technology or to understand the technology and solving business issues.

LASEWICZ: Just as an aside. It's kind of interesting. A lot of the people we've talked to so far are operating kind of at a juncture between two fields or two different sets of responsibilities such as what you are working with business and technology.

And it seems to be a recurring theme and I'm intrigued by that because it seems like those are gray areas and people are going in and solidifying them and bringing their skills and finding that the skills that have been developed are relevant in other ways and other responsibilities.

WINNIE: I think it's absolutely correct. You see this as a trend, but it's more important in today’s environment. Technology is valuable, but it's no longer just the technology itself. It's not the single thing people pursue.

I guess we do have few people in technology just for technology sake, but most of the time, technology is valuable because people are using it to solve a problem, to improve our lives, or to solve a business issue.

Only when you combine [the technology and business] knowledge together -- it makes it very powerful. So, we always started with looking at the business issues or some specific things we want to improve on in the environment.

Then we look at technology and how to solve the problem. So, that's why I think most of the people have been looking at the two areas and have kind of a [common] juncture between those two areas.

LASEWICZ: Talk a little bit about some of the issues of working in a corporation. Have you had any mentors in the course or your career? And, if so, what are the qualities that make a good mentor?

WINNIE: Yes, I have had mentors. Actually, I had my first mentor about three or four years ago and the mentor helped me greatly. In my career, they are the people I go to asking for advice if I have specific issues, a different perspective of maybe solving a problem and giving career advice. So, a mentor is very important. Now I have mentors.

And I think a good quality of a mentor is the willingness to listen and they should have experience, relevant experience in the field that you're interested in, being in the engineering field, technical field or business field.

And also I think they should be passionate about mentoring other people and help other people grow. I think those are the very important characteristics of being a good mentor.

LASEWICZ: Over the course of your career, have you faced any challenges and if so, how have you overcome them?

WINNIE: Yes, I have faced challenges. And probably an example would be I took an assignment two years ago as a CFO of IBM's joint venture with China GreatWall Computer Group. And I had not done any finance assignments before. Actually, I'm not trained in the finance area.

But, I did study finance in MBA school and I was able to utilize all my knowledge, my experience to really lead an organization to successfully achieve our financial objectives.

And I can tell you, I utilized my knowledge and experience from my engineering training, from my math background, from

also business training, all the areas of training, they all combined, I used them. I used them all.

LASEWICZ: What was it about that position that attracted you to it? Why did you say, yes, I know I'm trained as an engineer, but I do want to take on this CFO job?

WINNIE: I think the reason the assignment was very attractive to me was that it gave me the opportunity to lead an organization, to have the opportunity to set up policies and to enable the organization to grow. And we had very specific objectives to grow the organization.

There's a lot of things involved with the global economy, whether we need to negotiate with our joint venture partners and to ensure we have not only the compliance of all the local laws and the regulations, but ensure we achieve business objectives, run an efficient manufacturing facility, as well as grow our market and a business in China.

So, there are multiple challenges involved in the assignment. It's a complex environment, which makes it exciting. Challenge is always exciting.

LASEWICZ: During your work history, you've been working for a while now, have you faced any work/life balance issues? And if so, how have you dealt with them?

WINNIE: I think all of us in today's environment and economy probably all are facing different levels of work/life balance issues, the challenge of work/life balance.

For me particularly, I'm focused on taking an assignment which is challenging and I can have fun with and I can enjoy. Because we spend a lot of time doing our work, so you really need to find something you want to do, you love to do, you want to get up in the morning and be really enthusiastic of doing it. So, that's critical.

The second thing is teamwork and work environment. Building a team, get involved with a project, continue learning is also, I think, a good way to balance your work/life. Because if you like what you are doing, you're enjoying the people you are working with, you feel you are learning, then you really don't have that much of a stress level.

But also, I think that you do need to make sure you keep certain time for the family, spend time with the family and friends and doing things you enjoy doing. I go hiking with family and friends when I have time. I like hiking. I think

that's the way I balance my work/life. I enjoy it when I see nature, big mountains, then everything else [is] cleared away.

LASEWICZ: Were there any specific corporate programs that helped in achieving your balance? You know, some people talked about things like flex time and other HR policies, practices that have helped them manage both their personal lives and professional life. Have you been able to take advantage of any of those?

WINNIE: I have not really used the program that much. I think what helps depending on what people's requirements are. Those programs are really good. There's a certain population has the needs.

People have different needs. For me, programs probably more helpful are the ones which help you save time. For example, financial services on line, you know, things that you normally have to do yourself, services like investment advice, medical guideline to find a doctor etc.

So, the tools we have on w3 are helpful, I can go find things when I need it. Those are the programs [that] actually help me to save time.

LASEWICZ: Were there any other things that perhaps you'd like to mention that we haven't touched on today? Any insights that you think looking back over your experiences as both a student and in the field that you'd like to impart to people?

WINNIE: I think I would add two points. The first point is really always to believe in yourself. Even sometimes when we first study math, science, maybe the courses can be challenging, but really believe in yourself in any areas you are going to study or work assignment you are taking, to have the confidence that if you learn, you put your time in that, then you really can succeed in this field.

The other point is the willingness to take a risk. Don't be too conservative …to always enable yourself to look at a situation and take certain risks and to help yourself grow and develop. I think that's very important.

LASEWICZ: This has been terrific.

WINNIE: Thank you.

[END OF INTERVIEW]