

## Laura Miller-Oral History

**Chase:** I guess we will start from the beginning. You were born in Baltimore, right?

**Laura:** Yes, born in Baltimore.

**Chase:** You didn't grow up there though. For most of your childhood, you moved around a lot of states in the northeast. Correct?

**Laura:** Right. My dad was in retailing, and he started out in Baltimore where he grew up, and he worked at a store called Hamburgers, which was a clothing store. Then he moved to Filene's in Boston, which was a well-known department store until 2005 when it became Macy's. That's why we moved up to the Boston area. So we lived just outside of Boston in a suburb called Stoneham for a short time; then we got a house in Concord, Massachusetts. Technically West Concord, Massachusetts, which is the more middle-class part of Concord, Massachusetts. So we got a house there, and I lived in Concord, Mass. until 8th grade, and then in the middle of 8th grade we moved to Stamford, Connecticut. That's where I went to high school.

**Chase:** Moving around, was that difficult for you? You have younger siblings, right?

**Laura:** I have a younger brother and a younger sister. It was only difficult because I left in the middle of 8th grade, and my parents had gone through a divorce. So my safety net, my psychological safety net was a group of girlfriends of mine from middle school. One of them especially, who I played guitar with. We played James Taylor songs, and I wore blue suede boots, and I thought I was very cool. So when we moved to Stamford, it was very painful. What was funny is, fast forward when I became mayor, I had been fantasizing for years about having a reunion with my middle school girlfriends. There was a U.S. Conference of Mayors meeting in Boston, and so I used it as my excuse. So in 2004 I reassembled all of my best girlfriends from middle school. What was ironic was that one of them -- of course, my best friend who I played guitar with -- remembered me perfectly, and it was wonderful and so did her parents, but the other girls were like, "Why were we so important in your life?" (laughs)

**Chase:** So they had all moved on? (laughs)

**Laura:** (laughs) Oh, yeah they had all moved on. Most of the parents didn't even know me anymore. They were like, "Who called you from Dallas and wants to have a reunion?" So it was very funny. In my kitchen though, as a gift, they gave me a platter from a hand-made pottering company in Concord and it has "Middle School Reunion 2004" and all of the names of the girls are on the edge of the plate.

**Chase:** So it's official. That's an artifact.

**Laura:** Oh, big time. I have a picture upstairs of me and the girls that I keep on my desk. So, middle school had a profound effect on me, establishing these friendships. In fact, the girl, this is so off topic, but the girl who was a guitar player who ordered that gift with all of our names on it, her mom recently died, and because I have great memories of being in their house when I was in middle school, all of the pottery her mom had -- which came from that same pottery company -- my friend sent me as a gift to remember her mother by. She knew that her mother would be happy that I had it. So in my window over there, I have a vase now that I just got in the mail, and I have some other pieces. I'm a very sentimental person.

**Chase:** Do you think it was because you moved around so much, that you enjoy having these memories of these places?

**Laura:** Yeah, and mostly because, and I tell this story because people always ask me, “You always seem to have such a strong sense of outrage about things, and that’s why you were a crusading journalist, and that’s why you ran for office. Where does that come from?” And I have told this story once or twice, but I became an outraged human because when I was in middle school, in that period, my dad had moved to New York in retailing, and my parents had divorced. It was a very bad time, my mother took the divorce very poorly, and became quite sick. I remember one day, someone had shown up at our house. The one thing that we had of value in our whole house was a stamp collection that my father’s grandfather had started at the turn of the century, and this was just a knockout stamp collection. Unbelievable. I remember it very clearly. I remember we kept it at the bottom of a trunk in the basement. So unbeknownst to me, my mother had decided that she wanted to know what the stamp collection was worth, so some guy comes over. I’m 11, my brother is nine, my sister is three. The guy comes over. We all sit in the living room with my mother. He looks at the stamp collection, and he says, “You know, I just don’t know how much this is worth. I am just going to have to take it and have it evaluated, and I’ll bring it back.” And even at 11 I thought, “This is not cool. This is not a good idea.” So he took the stamp collection, and he never came back. So for years I had nightmares about trying to find his red truck. I knew he couldn’t be far.

**Chase:** Hunt that man down.

**Laura:** Hunt that man down. And to this day, if I could find that man, he would know my wrath.

**Chase:** So it must have been worth quite a bit then?

**Laura:** Oh it was worth a lot. It was a great, beautiful, perfect stamp collection. Just perfect. So anyway, that’s where I get my outrage.

**Chase:** So out of this, you go to high school and you are the editor of the yearbook, the school newspaper and the literary review of your high school.

**Laura:** Trifecta

**Chase:** Yeah. Well most high schools, at least where I went, don’t have a literary review anymore, but we still have a yearbook and newspaper. But to be the editor of all three, how did that go about?

**Laura:** I was just on fire. I was a tigress. I mean, the good thing about high school is that I did all of the journalism stuff that I wanted to do, and the bad thing was that, I am the first one to graduate from college in my family, so there wasn’t a big education push. So when I got to high school, and I was doing all of the journalism, I started out as a straight A, great student. And then freshman year, I had long hair, braces and wireframe glasses, so I had this clash about my face, and I got everything cut off and got contacts in my sophomore year. I had a physics teacher named Mr. Heinzer. I didn’t like physics, so Mr. Heinzer pulled me over one day and said, “You know, if I were you, I would just give up on the science thing. Have a good time with socializing. Find a husband. Get married. You’re not the type of person who needs to be pursuing a heavy academic plan.”

**Chase:** What year was this?

**Laura:** Sophomore year of high school. Yeah, great guy. He said, “Just sit in the back and talk to the boys, and I’ll make sure you pass.”

**Chase:** This is like the late 70s?

**Laura:** Yeah, late ‘74. So I did exactly what he told me to do, because, you know, he was a teacher. Instead of going to Northwestern for journalism, where I should have gone, I

didn't get in, and in retrospect I am happy because I went to the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and I had a wonderful time. I had a great college experience and loved it. But anyway, my message to all young girls is to not to listen the teacher who tells you just to chill out in school.

**Chase:** I really hope we don't have any more like that, in the school telling people that.

**Laura:** I hope so, yeah. Everyone loved him, because he was so cool. And of course, my parents never were engaged so they didn't catch this -- that this was a turning point for me. But I was also busy in high school; because when I was 14 I walked into a Greek luncheonette in downtown Stamford, and the owner said, "Would you like to be a waitress?" and I said, "I would love to be a waitress." He said, "Well, are you 16?" and I said, "No," and he said, "Well, just don't tell anyone." So from 14 until I graduated high school, I worked in a greasy spoon in downtown Stamford and loved it. I loved it. I worked every day after school. On Saturday mornings the owner would pick me up at home at 5:30, and he and I would open the store, and then I would work all day. It was really fun, and I was really on it. For years I stayed in touch with people that I served.

**Chase:** So was greeting the people, and meeting the people that you liked?

**Laura:** Mostly it was the pressure of taking orders at noon in downtown Stamford, people lined up for tables, and just the chaos of being a waitress.

**Chase:** So you thrive in high intensity?

**Laura:** Thrive, yeah. And I had dishes up my arms. You know, I was the man, doing the serving.

**Chase:** And you were happy, smiling the whole time.

**Laura:** So happy, and I always made enough money to get the bus home at night after work. It was funny. And my dad always said, "What are you doing? Why are you working as a waitress in downtown Stamford and taking the bus every night?" and I was like, "Because it's cool. It's awesome. I'm really good at this." On Sunday mornings I would take the owner's car, his old station wagon. I would take it home and wash it in the driveway. I was a lunatic. (laughs)

**Chase:** I mean, that just doesn't happen anymore. You don't just walk into somewhere, especially as a 14-year-old, and are offered a job.

**Laura:** Oh yeah. It was amazing. I was so flattered. And I wore a candy stripe uniform, white knee-high socks and saddle shoes. It was really great, a little apron.

**Chase:** You were a caricature, then?

**Laura:** I was a caricature. I was voted most unpredictable in my senior class. (laughs)

**Chase:** I'm starting to see why.

**Laura:** I use to stand outside the diner, and I would wave my dishtowel in my little candy stripe uniform, and my marching band from my high school would go down and would go, "Oh God, there she is! Miss Unpredictable, there she is!" (laughs) I never went to one football game in high school, because I was always at work. It was so funny.

**Chase:** But they still knew who you were.

**Laura:** Oh yeah. It was very funny.

**Chase:** So what got you into journalism? I mean you were involved in all of this stuff in journalism in high school, but was it just kind of a fluke? Did you decide go and do it?

**Laura:** When I was very little in Concord, I use to lie under the covers and write novels in little notebooks. I wish I still had them. I wrote a wonderful novel off of the Harriet Tubman character, and I loved reading. I loved penmanship. Like when I do The New

York Times crossword puzzles now, it always takes me back to my careful penmanship when I was in third grade. So I think it was a combination of liking actual physical writing and then loving to read. I was always in the summer book programs in West Concord in our little library, and I read the most books and got the gold star on the wall and that kind of thing. I just liked making up stories.

**Chase:** So journalism was a natural fit, then?

**Laura:** It was. I mean, I knew the day that I walked into high school that I was going to be a journalist. That's why I did the lit review, edited that. My boyfriend at the time ended up going to RISD – the Rhode Island School of Design -- for penmanship, drawing and illustration; he was the illustrator of the lit. review. He did the drawings on the cover of the yearbook, so we were just like a big tag team for writing and illustration. And then, typical, the principal shut down one issue of the newspaper, because of course he didn't like what I was going to write in an editorial. We had teacher advisors, and I thought that they were unfairly not letting something happen, you know, something enormous like not letting us pick our prom band or something. It was something I was really mad about. So I wrote this scathing editorial about the teacher advisors, and the principal called an emergency meeting with the student council and the whole newspaper hierarchy, and we all had to go to this meeting. They said I couldn't run the issue, and I said we are going to run it anyway, and then he said then you're no longer a student at this high school and I'm going to call your parents, and I'm like okay, okay. Uncle, uncle. (laughs)

**Chase:** So you gave?

**Laura:** Yeah, I gave.

**Chase:** Wow you were a muckraker before you even had the skills to be a journalist.

**Laura:** Oh yeah, exactly. Yeah. It's pretty bad though when you're a muckraker without the skills. (laughs) You get in all kinds of trouble. It's better to have the skills, but it took a while to learn them. Anyway, I'm still in touch with...my favorite teacher of all time -- a high school business teacher named Mary Bankowski who taught me typing. She's still alive and she lives in Ohio, and I'm still in touch with her. She knew I was a lunatic, and she was a lunatic too; she called me "Pickles" because I formed my own club. I was bored with all of the clubs, so I formed a club called "Students with a Purpose." (laughs) Our purpose was to sell bagels and pickles -- pickles at lunch and bagels in the morning - - and use the money to buy cleaning supplies to clean all of the water fountains in the school.

**Chase:** I read about this, yeah. Your act to clean up the water fountains in your school.

**Laura:** Yeah, so it was a completely insane situation. And the kids loved being in the group -- number one: we loved selling pickles and bagels, and we loved eating pickles and bagels, which was good, and number two: we loved cleaning things up. So anyway, she called me "Pickles". That was my nickname in high school. I think that's another reason why I was most unpredictable in high school.

**Chase:** Yeah, this is just a weird situation. (laughs)

**Laura:** (laughs)

**Chase:** I mean, did it work? Did you get results?

**Laura:** Oh I thought it did. I mean the sinks were clean. (laughs) And kids were eating these enormous pickles at lunchtime.

**Chase:** So you just didn't like any of the groups? So you were like, I'm going to make my own?

**Laura:** I didn't fit into any group. This is a good thing to tell people who aspire to big things but think they have to be a certain type of person to get there... because the last thing I thought I would do would be to become a mayor of a big city. I didn't fit in any group. I played basketball freshman year, and I only made one basket. It was from the fifty-yard line, and I made the basket as the whistle was blowing and I never made another shot the whole year. I was very clumsy. It was just a weird thing that I made that one basket.

**Chase:** Well that's the one that counted though.

**Laura:** Well yeah, I thought that was awesome. But they knew I was just lucky. So at the end of the season, they cut me, so I never played basketball again. Then the next year, the track coach saw me walking in the hallway and said, "You have long legs, do you want to run on my team?" and I am like, "Yes!" So I joined the team, and I was the miler. I recruited a girlfriend, but she beat me the first time she ran the mile with me, and I was so upset that I quit the team. Yeah, I mean unbelievable! But I'm glad I did that because now I am a big runner. I run all of the time. I love it. It's a big part of my life, and if it wasn't for him, I would have never have even thought to start running. So I am very appreciative for that. But yeah, I just didn't fit in anywhere. I didn't fit in with the jocks or the brainiacs. So I kind of carved out my own thing in high school.

**Chase:** Well what an innovative idea. If you don't fit in anywhere, make a space for yourself.

**Chase:** So getting into college, I found a quote. I don't know if this is true or not. Something about like your friend told you to go to this college because the beer and the football were great.

**Laura:** Well, the beer and the football players *were* great. (laughs) Yes, that's what she said. She had gone to high school with me. She was a year older. That's when I didn't get into Northwestern, which crushed me, and I didn't get into the University of North Carolina, their journalism program, which crushed me. I remember, I applied to Chapel Hill, and I took the bus down, by myself, from Connecticut to North Carolina to see the school. I walked in, and I said to the admissions folks, "I'm here because I want to apply, and I want to go to school here." The woman said, "What were your SAT's?" I told her and she said, "Those are awful, you're not getting in here. Here's a map. Show yourself the campus." And I'm like, "You're kidding, right? I just took a bus from Connecticut." Yup, here's the map. So I gave myself the tour, went home on the bus and didn't get in. (laughs)

**Chase:** That's brutal.

**Laura:** Oh it was brutal! It was just brutal. It was abusive. Ugh.

**Chase:** I mean, you don't treat students like that anymore. You try to say, well we'll send you a nice letter and an e-mail so you can be in your house, by yourself, when you get your rejection.

**Laura:** Yes, exactly! So you don't kill yourself on the bus. I mean, it's unbelievable! So, character building, I guess you might describe it.

**Chase:** That's a nice way to put it.

**Laura:** I guess that's a nice way to put it, yeah. So, when I didn't get in there, and I had gone out to Madison to see it with my dad, and we liked it, I got this letter from my girlfriend saying, "I'm here". She was dating a guy named Hodag.

**Chase:** Hodag?

**Laura:** Hodag.

**Chase:** Was that legal...

**Laura:** Nickname.

**Chase:** Okay.

**Laura:** I forget his real name, but his name was Hodag, and all of the Wisconsin boys had nicknames. She said, "You should come here for the football players and the beer, and Hodag has a best friend named Hebes and we should all go swimming."

**Chase:** Hebes.

**Laura:** Hebes. On the first day, when I got there Hodag and Hebes and my girl friend and I went out, and I went out with Hebes for all of freshman year. Yeah, it was pretty funny.

**Chase:** Hodag and Hebes. That's like some kind of early morning sickness.

**Laura:** (laughs)

**Chase:** Like some buddy comedy.

**Laura:** (laughs) Yeah exactly. They were awesome guys, and we had a great time, but it was, you know what was great for me in Madison, Wisconsin is that it's the heartland. The people are so nice. They are so honest. They are so awesome. I had the most wonderful time there, and I have been going back twice a year for the last six years. I've served on a board up there, and I just love it, and I wish my kids had gone to Madison. It was a great experience. I did a lot of journalism there.

**Chase:** Besides the newspaper, what else did you do up there?

**Laura:** I, lets see, I interned. Well, I was the campus correspondent for Time magazine.

**Chase:** Oh wow.

**Laura:** Which was cool.

**Chase:** Yeah. Very cool.

**Laura:** And then I was the campus correspondent for the Milwaukee Sentinel. And then I worked one summer at Woman's Day Magazine in New York; one summer at the Dallas Times Herald; one summer at the LA Times. I also took off a semester to work at the LA Times for college credit. No money. So I did pretty much everything.

**Chase:** Yeah, you were all around.

**Laura:** All around.

**Chase:** About the Dallas Times Herald, that's when you worked for the Style section, right? You interned there. How was that, because part of what we are doing here is we are talking about women in words, and a lot of these profiles have to do with women in journalism when all of that was kind of changing? So what was your experience with that? With the Style section? It's kind of, at least in my reading, that's what a lot of female journalists were put there by this sort of like "boys club."

**Laura:** Right. And in my case, I would agree with that, except The Times Herald at the time was at its apex. It was a fabulous newspaper, competing every moment with The Dallas Morning News. Incredible editors that went on to the LA Times. So it was next to impossible to get a job there, and the only reason I got a job there was because at the time my dad had gone from Filene's in Boston to Lord & Taylor in New York, and now he was the president of Neiman Marcus nationwide.

**Chase:** So that's quite a ladder to move up.

**Laura:** Yes. So the only way, I mean, I spent my freshman year -- freshman year was slow for me. I worked at the student newspaper, which I hated, and I only wrote a few

stories. I didn't have anything but some student newspaper clips and my high school work. In high school, I had been a correspondent for the Stamford Advocate, which is a big city newspaper, doing a regular high school column, and I had a lot of high school journalism experience. But when you get to college, none of that makes any difference. They don't care. So I only had this handful of college newspaper clips. I really didn't have standing to get a job at the Times Herald. The only reason I got it is because my dad called the editor and said, "My daughter is in journalism. Would you let her have an internship?" And they said, "sure," and what was worse was that the fashion editor... they wanted a fashion section and The Morning News had also just started one that was very competitive. So they called the fashion editor and said, "Guess what? You have an intern," and she said, "I don't want an intern." (laughs) They said, "Well, you've got one." She said, "You know this is a brand new section. I have enough work to do. I can't babysit an intern." They said, "You've got her. Just let her sit in the office then and do nothing and make your coffee." So I went to work for her. She was not happy. It was a godsend for me because I worked my butt off for her, and she loved me. We were thick as thieves by the end of the summer, and we stayed in touch for many, many years. Lana Ellis. I just loved her, and I got wonderful experience. She just threw me out there. I did tons of stories for her, and I made my biggest journalism mistakes there. I remember there was an article that I did about, oh I don't know, somebody making a dress and needing something special for it, and I remember that I didn't know who to call for advice. Oh, that's right! I was writing the... people would die if they knew this, but I was writing the fashion advice column in the fashion section. I was still wearing like white knee socks.

**Chase:** Yeah, you were just telling us about your candy-striped dress, braces and long hair.

**Laura:** Yeah, and even though my dad was president of Neman Marcus, I didn't know anything about fashion. I was still, really not at all, fashionable. I was writing fashion advice, and I was in Dallas – this hugely fashionable city! So I was mortified, and I remember I picked up the phone one day, and I actually called the editor of The Morning News' fashion section to get advice, which was the competing paper.

**Chase:** Crossing enemy lines?

**Laura:** Yeah. It was my biggest mistake in journalism ever. So of course, they actually put out an advertising piece, that the staff of the Times Herald fashion section was calling them to get fashion advice, and it became part of the marketing. It was really bad. But anyhow, it was a great summer, and I got really great clips out of it, and I had a really great time. So I was lucky to get that.

**Chase:** So you weren't making coffee for long?

**Laura:** No, no, no. I was working, because she was a one-man show, and she realized that I would do anything. And that's one thing that's surprising about this generation of young people -- they tend to think that they shouldn't clean out the trash, and they shouldn't make the coffee, and they shouldn't go and rake the leaves out in front of the store or whatever it is that needs doing. You just have to do anything you're asked to do. I think that my waitress background, my sense of outrage, all of that, I would just do anything to get where I needed to go. Anything. Well, you know, hard-working wise (laughs). So that helped me a lot. So it was good. It was a good job.

**Chase:** So you did all of these internships and stuff, so when you graduated, what was your first job outside of graduation?

**Laura:** One thing, also, and this is a girl thing that guys wouldn't appreciate. For years, I had read Glamour magazine, which was my favorite national magazine as a teenager. And so I remember thinking, I have done enough internships, and I have worked hard enough to apply to be one of the Top Ten College Women, which is an annual feature they have had since the 1950's. They pick ten college women a year to highlight, their idea of successful college women who are ready for a career. So they selected me in 1980. For me that was a huge deal, and it almost cost me getting my first job out of college because I interviewed with The Miami Herald, and I sent down a copy of that article with a big copy of the picture that they ran. When I went to Miami to interview, the managing editor said, "Why would you send me this picture of yourself all blown up?" I said, "Because I won this big award, and it was the biggest thing that has ever happened to me." He said, "Yeah, but I think it's really weird. You're a girl, and this is like a glamour picture. Why would you send this to me? It really makes me wonder about your judgment and what your values are." I was like, "I'm really sorry I sent it, but I'm really going to work hard for you, so please hire me." I got hired anyway, but it was a mistake.

**Chase:** Another misstep that you had to explain?

**Laura:** Well, I'll tell you the other misstep. Fast forward, I am a young reporter doing great investigative journalism, and I applied to The Washington Post to be an investigative reporter at the Washington Post. I get to Washington, to the last set of interviews, and I sit down with Woodward. He's interviewing me because he's the head of the investigative journalism team, and he says, "Well, why in your resume does it say that from June to September of 1980 you worked at the LA Times as a reporter?" I said, "Because I did." He said, "Well, why doesn't it say 'intern' as opposed to 'reporter'?" I said, "Because my job was a reporter." He said, "You are purposely using deception on your resume, in order to not say that you were an intern, and you are trying to show something that you aren't. You did it in three different spots; therefore you are not at the caliber that we want at the Washington Post."

**Chase:** That's high stakes. That's intense.

**Laura:** Oh yeah, and then I didn't get the job.

**Chase:** It wasn't intentional, was it?

**Laura:** No. I mean, it was obvious that it was an internship, right? It said that I was in college from '76 to '80, and then it said summer '78, summer '79, summer '80. These three months. It wasn't even a conscious anything, but he saw it as being, you know, a stretch, and so I didn't get the job. It was shocking. So another piece of advice -- to college students crafting their resumes: make sure you say it's an internship. I always hear these horror stories about resume padding, but this was so inadvertent and so minor.

**Chase:** Just one little discretion of a word. Yeah.

**Laura:** Yeah. So anyway, lesson learned. I have a lot of lessons learned.

**Chase:** That's great. So just be brutally honest?

**Laura:** Yeah. I always make sure that my kids say "intern" -- don't say that you're an administrative assistant. Say that you are an intern. Intern, intern, all the way down. Yeah, I'm really careful about it.



**Chase:** That's funny, because a lot of the workshops that I have gone to for resumes have said, "Oh yeah, just give yourself a nice title down there," like give yourself a title for all of these things you did. But apparently not. Not if you want to be an investigative reporter.

**Laura:** (laughs) Yeah. Exactly.

**Chase:** So I read that you didn't like working at the Miami newspaper.

**Laura:** I didn't like it. It's funny. It was a real coup to get a job at The Miami Herald right out of college – so exciting -- but even though I had worked in Dallas, and my dad was living here at the time, the weather in Miami was horrendous. You would get up in the morning, and you would leave the apartment, and it would be a wet heat. So it would be 90 degrees and a wet heat, and you would be literally dripping wet half an hour after you left the house. I hated that. Secondly, it was right after the Liberty City riots. So there was a very strong sense of being unsafe, just anywhere in Miami. I carried mace on my keychain. And I, of course, I was out 24/7 trying to get stories, so I could have easily walked into the wrong situation. It was just a bad feeling. And then, because I was a new reporter, I was working in the suburban section of Miami, which isn't glamorous like being in downtown. I mean, I did really, really good work there, and I could have easily stayed there and gone downtown. I don't know. There was just something about it. So instead of staying, because my dad was in retailing, and he was always overseas on buying trips and leading delegations and meeting with designers, I met a bunch of people from Europe that he associated with. They would always tell me, "How can you call yourself a journalist if you have never traveled outside of America?" And I hadn't, ever. I hadn't gone to Canada, Mexico, anywhere. So on my one-year anniversary, since I wasn't crazy about Miami, I called my dad and said, "I'm going to quit my job today, on my anniversary, and I'm going to go to Europe." He said, "And what are you going to do?" I said, "I'm going to hang out and travel around." He said, "That's the worst idea I've ever heard." I said, "Yeah, but I really want to do it. Your fashion shows start in seven weeks, and I want you to take me with you. You have never taken me with you. You have gone for 30 years. You are taking me with you." And he said, "Oh God." He took me with him. I went to Milan, London and Paris. I did all of the fashion shows with him, and then he left. I was there with a backpack and a Europass and I stayed for nine months.

**Chase:** You backpacked across Europe?

**Laura:** Yes. I backpacked across Europe. I covered the Falklands War out of Great Britain. That was really fun. I went to the Cordon Bleu cooking school in Paris. I wrote about that and gained 20 pounds. And I also covered Martial Law in Poland. I went to Poland by myself, and I did a piece for The Miami Herald about that. Then Grace Kelly died, and so The Miami Herald flew me into Monaco to cover the funeral, and I did that. So when I got back from all of that, The Dallas Morning News reached out to me and said, "Do you want to come work for us as a reporter?"

**Chase:** So were you just freelancing for The Miami Herald during your time?

**Laura:** I was, but then The Dallas Morning News somehow knew. Somehow found out. I don't know why they knew anything about me.

**Chase:** Because you called in for advice that one time.

**Laura:** That's right! I forgot about that. So they called me in Europe, and they picked up a lot of the articles that I did for The Miami Herald. So when I got back they offered me a job.

**Chase:** How great. You went soul searching and came back to an open position.

**Laura:** Yeah, really unusual. But I ended up hating the job because they stuck me on the Dallas County government beat. I just hated it, and so I just dedicated my life for the next year and half to get off the Dallas County beat. Yeah, I hated it.

**Chase:** So did you like Dallas?

**Laura:** Um.

**Chase:** It seems like you came here because of your father's work there, and then you came back to Dallas. So in writing my notes, I wondered what made you settle down in Dallas.

**Laura:** Yeah, that's a good question. I think because they courted me, I decided to come here. At that point I had liked Dallas for, kind of, three reasons: frozen margaritas...

**Chase:** That's a good reason.

**Laura:** Really good reason. Tex-Mex, and then the third reason was there use to be a bar called, um, it was an outdoor beer garden. It was right at the Tollway and Lemmon, and they got rid of it since, but they had picnic tables out back and live music, and you only drank long necks. It was so awesome. Texas Teahouse. It was unbelievable. I remember the summer I worked for the Times Herald, I dated a whole bunch of Dallas boys. One of them, who I am still in touch with, one of them, he and I would go to the Texas Teahouse. He would wear boots and a hat, and one night we were drinking long necks and listening to music, and he put me over his knee on a picnic table and he said, "You're the feistiest damn Yankee woman I have never known," and he spanked me -- in a harmless, funny way -- in the middle of the beer garden. It was awesome. So anyway, those were the three reasons I really liked Texas.

**Chase:** So much for southern gentlemen.

**Laura:** Yeah, yeah. He remembers it very well. We laugh about it. He's a major energy entrepreneur in Dallas now, but I will let his name stay unknown. So that's why I loved Texas. I thought it was really colorful and cool. I would have never have stayed here, except that while I was working at The Morning News I got set up on a blind date with my husband.

**Chase:** I was going to ask how did you meet your husband. Blind date?

**Laura:** Blind date.

**Chase:** Who set it up?

**Laura:** A Dallas County Commissioner named Chris Semos, who has since died. But he had been in the Texas Legislature with my husband, and he kept trying to set me up with Steve, and I said "I don't want to go out with a two-bit politician". My husband said, "I don't want to date some bitchy reporter". And so we never, ever went out.

**Chase:** So you guys were meant for each other?

**Laura:** Obviously yeah. Exactly. Chris had a Greek restaurant in Oak Cliff, and so one night he invited me to dinner, and sure enough he invited Steve to dinner. We both ended up there for dinner. We both hated each other. We left in a huff. And then one day Steve invited me out on a blind date. He called me at the paper, and I said okay. He called me, and he said -- I was sitting at the feature desk, I remember -- he has this big voice, and he said, "I don't want to go out with you, and you don't want to go out with me, but we are

going to do this one time to get Chris off our backs, and then we will never go out again.” I said, “Sounds like a plan.” So we went to a black tie event at the Dallas Museum of Art.

**Chase:** This is so business.

**Laura:** Yeah, it was so weird. It was such a turn off. It was a black tie event, and of course I hated it because I was a 25-year-old, intense, jaded journalist and I was sitting at a table with the Chairman of the Board of IBM. These CEOs were all at this table, and I was in my vintage clothing stage, and I had a two dollar dress on that I had bought at a flea market in Woodstock, New York, near where my mom was living.

**Chase:** Dressed to impress.

**Laura:** Yes. I dry-cleaned it, though.

**Chase:** Or making a statement. That’s probably more likely.

**Laura:** Yeah. Exactly. And I had the dress on, and I had splurged on a pair of hose that had the decorative spots on the back of the leg, which looked really elegant I thought. When we were walking up the steps to the Dallas Art Museum restaurant, Steve saw my legs and he thought to himself “This girl has a bad mole condition; I’m never taking her out again” (laughs). So yeah, anyway, he never asked me out again. So two weeks later, I called him and said, “I had a horrible time, but you’re the smartest guy I have ever met, so let’s try this again.” And then I got stuck in Texas, because if you marry a Texan you never get out.

**Chase:** It’s true. And did you ever ask, did you say his name was John Semos?

**Laura:** Chris Semos.

**Chase:** Chris Semos. Why did he want to set you up so bad? Did you ever ask him that?

**Laura:** I don’t know, and it’s funny. His closest friend was Steve. Steve had been dating an actress for seven years, and she had two kids. And she was just moving to LA to try to get her big break in acting, so Chris, I think, saw an opportunity there to put us together. I don’t know why he thought we would make a good couple. We still marvel to this day why he thought this was a good idea.

**Chase:** He saw something nobody else did.

**Laura:** Absolutely. Two type A first born children, killing each other. That’s what he saw.

**Chase:** Yeah, he just wanted to see a blood bath.

**Laura:** Yeah. Exactly.

**Chase:** Okay, so let’s move on. So you were at The Dallas Morning News when you met Steve, and then you moved to New York, right?

**Laura:** Right. Now why would I move to New York, if I was in love with a guy in Dallas?

**Chase:** Right. Why? What sent you up there?

**Laura:** Because we cancelled two weddings. (laughs)

**Chase:** Woah.

**Laura:** Now, does this surprise you? It’s me, it’s me, remember.

**Chase:** Well after hearing about you guys and your courtship phase, this doesn’t surprise me. This is making a lot more sense.

**Laura:** Yeah, so I cancelled the first wedding, and then he cancelled the second wedding. When he had cancelled the second wedding, I had been to Priscilla of Boston, which makes wedding dresses, and it’s in Boston, and my dad was personal friends with Priscilla. So I had flown to Boston and got fitted for my dress. I had a dress, we had

booked the brand-new Crescent Hotel, the invitations were ordered, and he cancelled the wedding. So I remember that morning I said to him, "You know, I am going to leave Dallas now because you cancelled the wedding." He said, "Okay, but on your way home from work today would you pick up my shirts at the dry cleaners?" And I said, "I think you're missing the point. I'm moving." So anyhow, I left, literally that day. This is another lesson learned, for all you young people looking for work. That day I walked into The Morning News and talked to my boss and said, "Steve cancelled the wedding. I am out of here. I'll be back in a week. I'm going to find a job." He said, "Fine." I took all of my clips, and I flew to Washington, and I insisted that I be interviewed at every newspaper between Washington and Boston.

**Chase:** Insisted?

**Laura:** I insisted. I said, "I am here. I have clips. I'm a good reporter. I'm aggressive. I want an interview." So I got two offers. I got an investigative reporter job at The Baltimore Sun, and then I interviewed in New York, and I loved the editor at the New York Daily News. He said, "You should probably work on the city desk; we will call you." So he calls me and says, "Listen, there is nothing in your clips to indicate that you can write a column. Have you ever written any kind of editorial piece or opinion piece?" I said no. He said, "So do you think that you can do it for the Daily News?" I said *of course*, and we both start laughing. He says, "This is so funny. You're 27. You have never written a column, and Jimmy Breslin is our columnist, and I have been looking for a woman for two years." He told me he had asked all of these amazing, talented women to write a column, and they all said, "I don't want to be compared to Jimmy Breslin. I'm not interested." He said, "No one will touch this. You have no experience. You will probably fail, but since you want to try it I'm willing to give it a chance." So he hired me. He said, "If your columns are lousy, after three months I'm going to demote you to the city desk and dock your salary." And I said fine. So I moved up. I got an apartment in Brooklyn, and I worked in New York, and six months into the job, I was kicking ass having fun as a columnist. I came back to Dallas one weekend and eloped with Steve. So I kept commuting for six months, and then I moved back to Dallas. The Daily News editor loved me, Gil Spencer. Such a great guy. He called Dave Burgin, who was the editor-in-chief at the Dallas Times Herald, and said, "This intense woman is coming back to Dallas because she married a Texan, and you should hire her as a columnist because she'll stir things up down there." And Burgin said, sight unseen, okay you're hired. So what was really fun was, you remember the Walker Railey story? There was a pastor here in Dallas, very, very famous. He tried to kill his wife one night, and he failed, so she was in a coma. That had just happened, like a couple of months earlier. The whole world thought he had tried to kill his wife, but there was no evidence, and he hadn't been criminally charged. Because he was so prominent in Dallas, the cops never handled the investigation correctly and never got the evidence. The Dallas Morning News had a reporter named Olive Talley who was a terrific investigative reporter, and she had been breaking all of the stories about the investigation and the whole back story. And I remember the first day I got to Dallas, I knew that I wanted to cover that story and I knew that I wanted to find a way to beat Olive at her story. So I got to town, and they told me to go to HR, and I said I'm sorry I'm too busy, and I drove to East Texas, to the parents of the woman in the coma. The wife. They had never talked to anybody, and I got to the house and I said I was with the media, and they said to leave. I said I have driven so far,

could I just have some tea? They said, okay. So they brought me in and gave me tea and cake, and seven hours later I left with the story. I drove back to Dallas, and we ran three front-page, banner strip columns. That was my debut in Dallas as a columnist.

**Chase:** So the asking was a success?

**Laura:** Oh yeah. Absolutely yeah. It was awesome. So I did that. I was so happy with everything. I came back, I was married, my husband and I had our first house in Oak Cliff. I had this great job. We were in this newspaper war. It was so fun. Then, the Times Herald sold, and the new publisher came in, and it was just a new day. There were so many sacred cows, all of a sudden. And there I was, the ultimate kicker of the sacred cows, and I just couldn't operate. It was just awful. And I, of course, kept trying anyway. There was a great story that I wrote about Ross Perot, Sr. He was opposed to strengthening the authority of the city's citizens police review board because he thought it was unfair to the police. Well, it turned out that his daughter-in-law, Sarah, who is married to Ross Perot Jr., Sarah was driving too fast through Dallas one day, and when she got stopped and the police said give us your license and registration, she opened her glove box and a gun fell out.

**Chase:** Oh no.

**Laura:** Oh yeah.

**Chase:** Oh man.

**Laura:** So cops could have arrested her, right? But to be nice to Ross Perot Sr., who they loved, they let her go, but they had admonished her. They were these big motorcycle cops. They admonished her, "Don't you ever do that again. You are lucky we are letting you go." Instead of being grateful, she ran back to her father-in-law and sobbed in his office that, "these big motorcycle cops were so mean to me." So Perot decided to have his own little police review board, and he called the chief and said, "You bring those motorcycle cops up to my office. I want to see them at 1 o'clock." They both came up thinking that he was going to thank them, and instead he chewed them out. So anyhow, I wrote this column. Awesome column.

**Chase:** Oh yeah, this is great making.

**Laura:** Awesome column. I loved it. As I got to the last paragraph, Dave Burgin comes up, and he taps me on the shoulder and says, "They are not running the column." I said, "Why?" "I don't know, Dean, the publisher, he just says no." I said, "Well they have to run it. We got it nailed. It's nailed. It's done. It's fabulous." He said, "Not running it." So I did what was unthinkable, I said, "Take me to the publisher." Which most editors would never do; so he takes me to the publisher. We sat down in his office, and I said, "Why don't you run this article?" He said, "Because my wife plays tennis with Sarah, and my wife won't let me write the story." So I was like "shit". So I left. I went back to the newsroom. Everybody in the newsroom knew about it. Some really funny reporter I know went into the system, took out my column and sent it to the Dallas Observer. The Dallas Observer said they were going to publish it.

**Chase:** Oh nice.

**Laura:** Yeah. So the Observer wrote about it, and it put enough pressure on us then that we published it, and it ended up being in the paper. It was fun.

**Chase:** You guys were sneaky.

**Laura:** Oh yeah, it was really fun. But then it just ended. A year or so after I got there, Burgin was out, and he was my mentor. He was great. I loved him. He has since died too.

And then I was stuck with a new editor named Roy Bode, who just didn't want any problems, and I was just a handful.

**Chase:** Yeah, you seem to just cause problems wherever you go.

**Laura:** Wherever I go. Yeah. So it was the only time I ever got fired in my life. I got fired. He tried to let me know by sending out a memo to the whole staff that there were three topics we could no longer cover as a staff. Actually, it said that the Metro columnists could not longer cover them, which meant me. One was, of course, Ross Perot. (laughs) One was Starplex, because I had been beating and beating on the Amphitheater in Fair Park since there was all kinds of juicy stuff about that, and one was Walker Railey. So he just took all of my favorite topics.

**Chase:** So basically, all but named you.

**Laura:** Yeah, he all but said, "please leave." (laughs) And I had the outrage to want to leave, but of course I didn't because I didn't have any other place to go and throw hand grenades at the time. So I stayed, and then I got fired. It was awful. I was pregnant with my first child. Yeah. And then I did freelance for D Magazine and that was when I wrote the John Wiley Price cover story that has had a long shelf life. And then Mike Lacey -- I have all of these fabulous journalist men in my life, all of these icons that I was fortunate to work for in my life -- but Mike Lacey came from Arizona as the owner of the alternative news weekly called New Times and said, "We are buying the Dallas Observer. It's a rag. We are going to kick ass. It's going to be awesome. We are just going to blow it out here. We are interviewing people, and so we just want to kind of talk to you." We had lunch and he said, "You know there's nothing in your clips, and I have read everything you have ever written, but there is just nothing that shows that you are aggressive enough for us."

**Chase:** Really?

**Laura:** I was like, (gasp) "but I just wrote that John Wiley Price Story." He said, "Well yeah, but you know that wasn't a big deal." And I went (gasps), "Oh, okay." And he goes, "I'll let you know." So anyhow, later he told me that it was all a ruse, and that I was made for this job, but that he wanted to keep me down and not let me think that I was like a hot shot or anything.

**Chase:** Keep that ego in check?

**Laura:** Yeah, so anyway I was so flabbergasted. But then he hired me.

**Chase:** What a power play.

**Laura:** Oh yeah. Crazy, but that was my dream job. The pinnacle of my professional life was working at the Dallas Observer. There were no sacred cows. I could do anything I wanted. I could have as much space as I needed in the paper. I could do opinion or just do straight investigative work. I could combine the two, which made other newspapers completely crazy. It was just awesome. It was awesome. And I would have stayed there. I would have stayed there a long time. I was making great money. I just loved my job. Then I got so mad at Dallas City Hall from covering it. This is what changed me, and made me go to the so-called dark side. I remember going to a city council meeting, and Steve Bartlett was the mayor, and they were all talking about a scandal I had written about involving the city manager. It was a whole thing. I remember Steve Bartlett said, "We are going to go to executive session under state law to discuss the following things," and I stood up in the audience. I had never done that before. I said, "You cannot go into executive session to discuss this issue because it is not part of executive privilege. You

have to discuss it at open session.” He said, “How dare you talk. What are you doing? You are a journalist. What are you doing talking?” I said, “I am just calling you out on this. If you talk about this behind closed doors, it is against the law. This is not real estate, personnel issues or economic development financials. This is not allowed in executive session. This is a government issue about your city manager. ” They blew me off. After that was over, I went to the city auditor and I asked for all of the documents regarding this issue. What was amazing was that someone in the office had done a written transcript of the meeting in the executive session that I had protested, and it was left in the pile. It was one inch down into seven inches of documents. It was the whole transcript of the executive session.

**Chase:** The goldmine.

**Laura:** The goldmine. I couldn't believe it. I didn't want to copy it, because I thought someone would catch me, so I wrote it all down in my notebook, and then I went to the copier, and then I copied it, and I took it back to the paper, and then we wrote a front page story about what had happened in executive session. It was unbelievable. Half of the conversation was about what the Dallas Observer was going to do.

**Chase:** So you guys were the subject of this?

**Laura:** Yeah. It was crazy. At that point I started saying to myself “you know I am effective as a journalist but only so far”. I can't really change anything. I can just expose it. I said, “I want to change it. I want to be inside. I want to see what I can do from the inside.” It just flipped for me. My husband was so dismayed. He said, “You know what, I am already in the Legislature. The last thing we need is two politicians in the house. You're going to be campaigning. It's going to be such a mess. We have three little kids.” Our kids were really little. I said, “I have to do this. I promise I am going to do this as an experiment. I want to know what happens to a person's brain when they campaign on idealistic issues with their heart in the right place, and then they get elected, and they become either furniture or corrupt. I want to know what happens to the brain.” And he's like, “Well I understand that you want to know what happens to the brain, and I know you, and once you get in there you're not going to get out. This is going to be your new obsession.” And I was like, “No, no. It will never happen.” So anyway, I ran and got elected. I walked door to door. I walked to 2,400 houses and talked to people. I had a crazy, devoted girl friend named Robyn Mirsky, who I am still good girl friends with, who drove the van and gave me the Diet Pepsi's, and I got out and walked day after day after day. So then I went to the other side. But what was interesting was, another funny story. So I was on the city council, and then our Mayor Ron Kirk quit to run for the U.S. Senate, and then I said “Okay I'm either up or out. I'm not going to sit here under another mayor and be frustrated and fight with the guy all of the time. I'm going to be the mayor and really change things, because all of the power is not in the city council. It's in the mayor.”

**Chase:** So you proved your husband right?

**Laura:** Yes. Absolutely. Yeah. So then I decided I am up or out. If I lose, then I am out of the city council and I am done with public service. I would have gone back to writing, I think, at that point. I still had the fire in the belly for that. But if I win, then I will really make changes. So my dad flies down from New York and says, “Listen, I lived in Dallas for a long time, and I know how Dallas works. If you run for mayor, it's just a waste of time because you can't change anything. It is a weak mayor form of government. The

same handful of families kind of run things. You can't run as an anti-establishment person and get anything done. You have small children and a nice husband. You're just going to waste their time and yours. It's just stupid. Don't run." "Oh, Okay, dad." And then I ran. (laughs)

**Chase:** I'm really seeing a pattern of someone challenging you personally, and then you just run with it and blow them out of the water.

**Laura:** Yeah, it happens a lot. My point is that he was right, and my husband was right. My personality and what drives me was best expressed as a journalist. Now it's so funny to me, because when people come to me on the street, it happens less and less as you get out of office, they come to me on the street and say "Oh, you're Laura Miller". It's usually when I'm dressed up and have makeup on. They are like, "You're Laura Miller," and I'm like, "Yeah." Then they go, "I really miss..." and then there is a pause and I wait for it. "I really miss you writing for the Observer." It's so funny because that was 15 years ago and my being mayor was only seven years ago. It is rarely "I miss you as mayor." Sometimes. But it is always, "I remember this story. I remember that story. I remember you writing, this and this and how awesome it was." Looking back, I enjoyed being mayor. I'm really proud of all of the things that I got accomplished, but my real sweet spot in my professional life was at the Observer. It was just the right combination of everything. Very fulfilling and exciting.

**Chase:** So you like it better when they say, "I miss you at the Observer" versus "I miss you as mayor."

**Laura:** Yeah. I mean, it doesn't hurt my feelings. I mean, obviously when you are the mayor of a large city you want everyone to say, "Oh we miss you as mayor," but that's just not really it for me. Some people do say that, but it is a very certain type of person. I always know who is going to say the paper versus mayor. The other thing that I want to say is that I think for politics and for elected office what is my best strength -- being tenacious, being spontaneous, going for the jugular, having a strong sense of injustice -- all of that was my best strength as mayor and my biggest weakness. All of those characteristics are perfect when you are a journalist, but when you try to be the balancer and the compromiser and that kind of thing, it just wasn't my strength set. The Wright Amendment at Love Field, I believe, would not have gotten resolved without me, but then we wouldn't have had the debacle over strong mayor either. So there are pros and cons.

**Chase:** Everything that I read, you seemed to be very polarized in your term of office, especially with other bureaucrats and business people. Stuff like that. They said, "She's a great person, but we hate her."

**Laura:** Yeah, so people either loved me, or they didn't like me at all. It was that way. In part because my years as an investigative reporter covering and criticizing the establishment preceded me. But you have to be who you are, and for example, my fighting the coal plants when I was mayor was just another obsession for me. It led to the current job that I have.

**Chase:** I was going to ask. Was that the big transition from the energy head that you are now?

**Laura:** I fought dirty coal plants for a year and half. When I left office, the environmental community said, "We want to give you money to set up an office to fight coal plants nationwide, and we want you to go teach other mayors how to fight coal



plants. “ I said, “That’s all fine, but to pick battles on individual coal plants is going to take forever.” In a state like Texas, no matter how hard you fight, the governor’s appointees can just give you the permit and, you’re there. I said, “Wouldn’t it be better to build the cleanest possible coal plant ever? Set the bar up to a standard that everyone else has to follow. If there is a better technology that has been proven, then everyone else will have to use it. “ They said, “We know of one company in America that is going to build a near-zero emissions coal plant.” I said, “Great. I want to meet them.” I have now worked for them – for Summit Power Group -- for seven years. I helped convince the company to bring the project, called TCEP, which stands for the Texas Clean Energy Project, to Odessa, Texas. We got a \$450 million award from the federal government to build it. We’ve had all kinds of obstacles in our way, and we have climbed over every obstacle. We believe that we will break ground in 2015, but it is a huge effort. It’s a \$2.5 billion project. And if we build it, then it will be the cleanest coal plant in the world. We are doing it with the Chinese. It is a partnership. What’s ironic is that even with all of the fun I had as a journalist and all of the things that I accomplished as mayor, it would be probably the biggest accomplishment of my life to actually know that I was an integral part of creating a coal plant for the 22nd century that hopefully will be a game-changer like catalytic converters for cars. In the 1950s when everyone was talking about putting pollution control on exhaust pipes the auto industry said, “It will kill the industry. We will never be able to afford it. No one will be able to have cars anymore.” They were made to do it, and now no one thinks about it because it’s been the standard for so long. It’s the same thing for coal plants. The technology is there. The first couple are very expensive. You have to get the kinks out. You have to find the efficiencies, but once you do it, that will be the new standard. That’s how it’s going to be forever and ever.

**Chase:** And to do it in Texas would be fantastic.

**Laura:** Yeah, and to do it in Texas is great too. It’s a real role model kind of thing. What would also be politically great by building it in Texas is that it captures 90 percent of its carbon, the project, but it’s all used for enhanced oil recovery in West Texas. So you’ve got the Democratic side and the Republican side, and they come together perfectly. We have had bipartisan support from the very beginning. It’s been very lucky.

**Chase:** So this company is based out of Seattle, correct? So were there ever talks about you moving up to Seattle to work with them?

**Laura:** No, because they knew I was here. Also, I only work on this one project for them. They also build solar, wind and natural gas plants all around the country and have for 20 years now. This was their only coal plant and it was Texas-sited, which is the only time they have had a project in Texas. My job was specifically to get this project off the ground.

**Chase:** So you are sort of like a forward base camp for this project in Texas?

**Laura:** Right. I am not an employee of theirs. I am a consultant. So I have the freedom to do other things, but I have turned down other things that have come my way because I just want this project to happen. This is important to me personally, to get this off the ground. I think it’s just a kind of dividing line between old coal and new coal, so that’s why I continue to work on it.

**Chase:** Do you think this is going to be a nice transition for the public to go from old nonrenewable resources into the future to more renewable resources? That jump from

coal to full electricity is a big jump to make, especially for existing infrastructure. Do you think this will kind of ease that transition in the future?

**Laura:** Yeah. What's surprising though is that in 2008, which was my first full year working on this, that was the period of Waxman-Markey and all of these bills to create a carbon tax and a carbon-trading system. The country was going to get serious about having an economic way to embrace coal, and to reduce carbon. Then it fell apart, and CO2 capture projects have just gone downhill from there. There were well over a dozen projects like mine that were in the pipeline in 2008 and 2009, and now there is only one new project under construction in America called Kemper County, and it's in Mississippi. They have had cost overruns and schedule delays, but thank goodness they keep moving forward. They are going to capture 65 percent of their carbon. So that's the only other new-construction project that is being built right now; we're the second one, and we have a higher capture rate. So there's a lot riding on us getting done, and if it doesn't get done and Kemper had all of these problems, I think the difficulties with the carbon-capture industry are going to be held up for years as a reason not to try and capture carbon off industrial projects, which are the greatest contributor of greenhouse gases.

**Chase:** Because there is just no success and everyone keeps failing?

**Laura:** Right. When I was fighting TXU, I was pushing something called coal gasification, where instead of burning all of the coal and having all of the pollutants go up the smokestack, you take the coal and put it in a big vessel at 3,600 degrees and vaporize it. Then you can pull out all of the bad stuff in its gaseous state. It's not coming up as soot where you are trying to pull off everything while it's going up the stack. The U.S. built two of these coal gasification plants in the 1990s in Wabash and Tampa, but they haven't built any since because the government built them (so private industry said they weren't financially viable), and they had maintenance problems and money problems. So TXU argued that gasification isn't ready for primetime. It doesn't work. Which is not true. So this would be another thing like that. Carbon capture doesn't work even though the science is there, because the first couple ones didn't get off the ground, and they weren't big financial successes. That will be the excuse. Which is why Kemper and the project I'm working on need to happen.

**Chase:** "Write it off, it's too much of a gamble."

**Laura:** Right. And if we don't do it, your generation is going to have to do it. And it'll be 20 years before people put the money forth to do carbon capture at commercial scale. And so, how are you going to get rid of carbon? I don't know how you guys are going to get rid of your carbon; we're just messing things up for you right and left.

**Chase:** I mean, I've done some research already. A lot of people talking about it and the legislatures changing their rhetoric from...like, "improving" to "adapting". The damage is done, we just need to adapt now.

**Laura:** Yeah.

**Chase:** Like it's, we're wasting our time trying to change it.

**Laura:** But doesn't it make you mad at my generation -- that we didn't move on it?

**Chase:** Yeah, I mean. Looking back on it, it's like a lot of people had the research and had the know-how, they just. There were people above them that kept kind of stamping out those voices.

**Laura:** Hmhm

**Chase:** Or didn't want to change, too reticent in their ways.

**Laura:** Yeah, and politically it just became a fight, and people walked away.

**Chase:** Yep, and there was money involved.

**Laura:** Obama now is pushing for stricter EPA rules on carbon, but that's just nibbling at the edges. I mean, I thought it was enough when New York City, Lower Manhattan, went under water. I thought that was enough to catch everyone's attention.

**Chase:** Like "here's a wake-up call," yeah. We just keep getting these wake-up calls and, it's not happening.

**Laura:** It's not happening. Yeah, it's really sad. Anyway, I'm just trying hard to do my part.

**Chase:** So that's part of the conviction as to why you're pushing so hard for these plants, is because maybe this will be the great, kind of—

**Laura:** Tipping point.

**Chase:** Yeah, a political and economic sort of nexus that shows everyone that this can be done, it can be profitable. It pleases everybody. Everyone needs to jump on this ship.

**Laura:** Right, and you know, it's fine to capture the carbon and just stick it in the ground and not use it for oil recovery. You know, that's what some environmentalists prefer. So everyone at first was pushing for a saline storage solution but, you know, there are a lot of different demonstration projects around the country looking at this -- what happens to the CO<sub>2</sub> when it's down in that rock formation. And, obviously, it moves, you know, it moves around. But when you use it for Enhanced Oil Recovery, it doesn't move around in those depleted wells because it sticks, it immediately adheres to the oil. And that's why you're able to get the oil up. Because what's left down there, the CO<sub>2</sub> works with it like a lubricant. It loosens the oil off the stone, and then you can pull it up. So it's kind of genius how that works, and you can sell it and make money on it. So for now, the bridge technology is the Enhanced Oil Recovery.

**Chase:** And I think that's what we need is a bridge technology. Anything too new and innovative is... people are too set in their ways, especially large oil companies like TXU and stuff. They're not going to go for that. That's too much of a change.

**Laura:** Yeah, like the first company. Ironically, one of the first companies I went to see to team up with us and help build our project in Texas was TXU.

**Chase:** Well you need a big flagship program like that, that'd be a great boon.

**Laura:** And they kind of laughed at me, like "Really? Really? You brought these guys in here to tell us to join with you to build a power plant?" and I'm like "Yep," you know.

**Chase:** And this was post your...

**Laura:** I had just left office. I had just left office, and we had had this enormous public battle. But all my guys, all the guys I loved at TXU, which I was fighting at the time, all ended up leaving because the CEO who had come in with this terrible idea to double the number of coal plants, he did that as a financial play that worked beautifully. Then TXU got bought out, they made a ton of money, and all the nice guys whose idea wasn't to build 11 new coal plants but went along with the new CEO, they all ended up leaving after the buyout. So I went in to the new regime and said "I want to build a coal plant with you". Yeah right, so, it didn't work.

**Chase:** Well, I mean, you had to try, though.

**Laura:** I had to try.

**Chase:** Yeah.

**Laura:** I tried with a lot of the big energy guys in Texas, but the reaction was “ughhhh, too risky, too risky, too expensive, too risky”.

**Chase:** They want to see results first.

**Laura:** Yeah, everybody does.

**Chase:** They want someone else to try and fail before they do.

**Laura:** Everyone wants to build the second one.

**Chase:** (laughs) The one that works, yeah.

**Laura:** Yeah, so anyhow. That’s my current obsession and my current passion.

**Chase:** So what kept you from going back to writing after you left office?

**Laura:** You know, it’s funny, because a lot of people have said “Why don’t you go back to writing?” So many people ask me to go back to writing. I think that once I went to the dark side -- and I was the hunted, not the hunter -- it just took the stuffing out of me. Like I just couldn’t go in anymore and pursue people like I once had. Um, I remember...

**Chase:** So you were the prey, for once, and then...

**Laura:** Yeah, once you’re hunted you just say “ohh, man.” To go out and do what I did for so many years. You have to really not understand what’s on the other end of that. You know, to be able to keep doing it the way I did.

**Chase:** Like turn a blind eye.

**Laura:** Well, you just don’t go there. You think “I’m doing this for the right reason, and I’ve got the goods, and I’m going to do it”. But when the tables are turned...I wish every journalist had the table turned just for a month or two. Just to see what it feels like.

**Chase:** Yeah, it’s funny. It was one of my questions. Do you think it would be beneficial for journalists to kind of get into public service or public office like this, just to see the other side? To get some perspective.

**Laura:** Yeah, it’s almost too complicated though. Because to do public service, a lot of times, you have to be able to sacrifice your income. So, I only could run for office because my husband paid the bills. Like, I left my six-figure salary at the Observer to make no money at all, and my husband had to bear the consequences of that and pay all the bills. And when I first joined the council, there were eight of us women. It was the first time there was a majority female council. And I remember I said to Ron Kirk “Let’s go put on the ballot salaries for council members,” and he said “But we’ve done it three times and it’s failed. I’m done with it.” I said “No, I’ll help sell it. I’ll get it support”. Because back then, when I first joined the council, it paid \$50 dollars a meeting. And so we put it on the ballot while I was a council member – a salary of \$37,500 for council members and \$60,000 for the mayor. And my selling point was “We’re a majority female council for the first time because we’re all housewives, and we don’t pay the bills”. And all my women colleagues were furious with me. “I’m not a housewife!” they said. I said “Well, do you pay the bills at 50 dollars a meeting? You’re only down here because you husband is paying the bills. So sorry guys, but that’s the reality”. So we won, and it got passed. And now it’s on the ballot again to increase their salaries next week. I’m all for it, I think it’s very well worth it. But I remember the first time when I was running for council -- I had been running for like a month. And all my friends, who were journalists, called me one day and said “Your opponent’s going to have a press conference in two hours, and he says he’s going to announce something about you that will ruin your campaign, and you’re going to have to withdraw from the race”. And I was like “Oh my

God, what is it?" And they were like "Well we don't know, but we are all going to the press conference; we can't wait to hear!"

**Chase:** (laughs) I'm loving this.

**Laura:** Oh yeah! So I hung up, and I was so petrified. I was in my white station wagon at the time, and I was so petrified that I pulled over to the side of the road and I sat there for two hours.

**Chase:** Just waiting?

**Laura:** Waiting, I was immobilized. I was so freaked out. I was like "Oh my God, Oh my God" and I looked back at my life. "What did I do that they're going to reveal?" and of course the main period I was thinking about was college. "Okay, four years in Madison, oh my god, could it be that? Could it be that? Oh no, maybe it's that?" I said, "Oh no, oh no, which of my friends call the press?" You know, I was so worried.

**Chase:** Yeah, "who's the Judas?"

**Laura:** Yeah. Right. So, the phone finally rang. I was just sweating, and this is where you flip, right? Like, all of a sudden, you're the hunted. Like "Oh, my, God..."

**Chase:** You see what it's like -- what you've been doing to these people? (laughs)

**Laura:** Oh my God it's the worst! It's the worst. So they called me and said your opponent Luis says that of the 36 times that you should have voted in local municipal elections, you only voted 32 times. That was it.

**Chase:** Scathing.

**Laura:** Scathing. So I'm like (sighs). It's crazy. And, of course, because I was me, I ran down to the elections department: "I did vote in all 36!" Poor Bruce Sherbert, the elections administrator at the time, he had to go through 10 years of records with me. This election, this election, this election. And sure enough, I had missed like, four elections.

**Chase:** Right.

**Laura:** So, anyway. And then, when the whole Don Hill thing came down and, you know, I was interviewed by the FBI, and I was interviewed by the media, and there was this long saga with that corruption case all unfolding. And, I don't know. It's just, you just go through all of that, and the whole contentious strong mayor campaign, and then I remember I had written many, many articles about oilman Ray Hunt and how unfairly he had taken from the taxpayers over and over and over again for his real estate projects. All of which I still stand by, all those stories. Then when I was a politician, you know, and you're focused on those same things, and then it becomes, um, what's the word I'm going to use... It becomes, um...

**Jessie:** Part of the environment?

**Laura:** No, it becomes... Well, it wasn't PC, it wasn't politically correct for me to be the Mayor of Dallas and be against yet another Ray Hunt subsidy, which I was completely against. And, of course, we had this long briefing where I exposed all reasons why we shouldn't do yet another tax abatement on Ray Hunt's latest building in downtown Dallas, and why we needed the tax revenue to help bring back downtown. And then there were literally six months of negative articles in The Dallas Morning News about how I had a personal vendetta against Ray Hunt. So when you go through all of that, I just didn't have the interest anymore to go back to journalism and slay dragons.

**Chase:** But do you think it's necessary to have journalism, journalists like you were beforehand there to keep public officials white-knuckled.

**Laura:** I do.

**Chase:** You think that's good for...

**Laura:** I think you have to have that. You know, I think one of the biggest criticisms I have of journalism today is that there aren't enough investigative reporters. TV, you know, doesn't even cover Dallas City Hall anymore.

**Chase:** Right.

**Laura:** Like every single night, even Channel 8 -- which was the last hope for investigative journalism on TV in Dallas -- nine times out of ten their lead story is about a shooting in Oak Cliff or Fair Oaks. It's, it's just awful the condition of journalism, in my opinion. Luckily, you have the Texas Tribune and you have alternative forms of journalism, non-profit, funded journalism that's coming up, that other people are turning to. So it's a hybrid right now, and its evolving. And hopefully it will evolve back into the Ben Bradlee school of journalism. I mean, I became a journalist because I was in high school with my Students with a Purpose Club when Woodward and Bernstein brought down Nixon.

**Chase:** Uh huh.

**Laura:** And that's who I wanted to be.

**Chase:** You wanted to be that guy?

**Laura:** I wanted to be those guys. Big time. I wanted to be those guys. So, I didn't want to be on the bus...first, before that happened, I wanted to be the boys on the bus -- patterned after the famous book called "The Boys on the Bus". I wanted to be on a political bus rolling through America with the presidential candidate interviewing him. And then I realized, after Woodward and Bernstein, I don't want to be on the bus; I want to be alone, doing my own thing, exposing my own stuff, generating my own material, and I don't want to be with everybody else asking questions. That was a really pivotal thing for me, it's a very important thing to have, and I do think that...I do think that you need the laser sharp focus of young, tenacious reporters with blinders on who just want to get to the truth. And you can't have that purity if you've been a politician, because there are so many nuances. Compromises.

**Chase:** Right.

**Laura:** Just your whole, the whole atmosphere of the political world, you just lose that purity, that total objectivity and sense that the world is black-and-white, never gray, that a journalist has. You've got to keep that. On the other hand, I wish there was a way for journalists to realize what they're doing to people. I mean, it's interesting. And this is a really good example. When I was at D Magazine, before I did the John Wiley Price story, I did a column every month. And one month this woman calls me on the phone. And says, I'm going through a War of the Roses divorce. And the man I'm divorcing is deaf and likes to rub blown up balloons on his private parts for excitement. And I think he's potentially hurting our daughter, who is six or seven. In retrospect, a smart journalist would have said, "Thank you, this sounds really dysfunctional. I want nothing to do with it."

**Chase:** Yeah, hands off. Yeah.

**Laura:** Bye. I did not do that. WHOOSH. I go rushing in. I spend a hundred hours on this small story...it was a one page column...a hundred hours. I'm at the courthouse, I read every single document, I interview the balloon-loving guy who ended up being a prince of a nice guy. Yeah, he liked balloons, but whatever. I mean, everyone has their thing. So

he's fine. I liked him. I felt bad for him. The woman was, you know, a very intense person. The daughter was little, you know, in the middle of the fight. So, I write this rock and roll, War of the Roses column. Very memorable because it had the balloons.

**Chase:** Oh, yeah.

**Laura:** And, um...and, in the court documents, she had claimed that he gave her herpes. I threw that in. Anyway, the story goes out. She goes crazy 'cuz its not what she thought it would be.

**Chase:** You didn't crucify him, so she's angry.

**Laura:** Right. I said, they're both using this kid as a punching bag. Typical divorce. Awful...everyone needs to learn to chill out.

**Chase:** Maybe that's why you went for it. You had that unique perspective of, you know...

**Laura:** Yeah, yeah, maybe that's why I went for it, yeah. So, anyways...uh, so this is 1990. And she started...she threatened to sue. She did sue. She sued for libel. And the case hinged on a number of things, most particularly the fact that she claimed she absolutely did not have herpes, and never said so. So I went back through all my notes. I didn't tape back then. I just took notes.

**Chase:** Yeah.

**Laura:** I write notes, and I couldn't find anything in the notes about the herpes.

**Chase:** Oh, no.

**Laura:** Yeah. So the lawyer handling the case for the magazine...I said, I don't make mistakes. As a journalist, I didn't make a lot of mistakes. I was very, very, very thorough. So, I said this came from the court documents. I know it. So, the lawyer sent an intern down to the courthouse to go through every single page, and it was in there. Case was dismissed. It was all fine.

**Chase:** Cool.

**Laura:** She kept calling, and calling, and calling. Ten years ago, I get a letter from the daughter at my house.

**Chase:** Oh?

**Laura:** And she says, 'It's me. I just want you to know that I turned out okay. That article...just haunts our family. Every day. It was horrible what you wrote about my parents. And about me. And I just wanted you to know, for the sense of my own well-being, that I did not turn out weird. I wanted you to know. Fast-forward to a month ago: The phone rings. It's D Magazine. 'Laura, that woman keeps calling.'

**Chase:** She's still calling?

**Laura:** This was twenty-five years ago.

**Chase:** You gave her a new obsession, is what you did.

**Laura:** Oh, yeah.

**Chase:** She is probably the only person still reading this article.

**Laura:** I know. Anyhow, but you...but think about it. No one knows her. She wasn't famous. It wasn't like it was some big politician. Then, it would have been easy to do. This is...so, even though this family came to me and asked me to write the story, think about the result because I needed to get another column out.

**Chase:** Some flash-in-the-pan, fifteen minute-

**Laura:** Yeah. So, that's what I'm talking about. There has to be...there ought to be (and there can't be with a young ambitious journalist), but if there can be a sense of 'why am I

doing this?', 'Is this important?', 'Does this...' And it's very hard to instill that in a young person.

**Chase:** But you think as soon as you've started asking those questions, you've lost...you've taken off the blinders?

**Laura:** Yeah, it's a very...it's, it's, it's...

**Chase:** A catch-22.

**Laura:** A catch-22, but you know, hindsight is 20/20. But I think journalists need to understand what it means that they have that freedom.

**Chase:** Yeah

**Laura:** It's an enormous tool. There are people who come up to me today, and say 'I remember this specific story,' or 'You don't remember me, but you wrote about me thirty years ago.' And I'll always go like this: "Was it bad?"

**Chase:** "Oh, no!"

**Laura:** And they say, 'No, if it was bad, I wouldn't even talk to you.' And I say, 'You were one of the five people I wrote something nice about?!' (laughs) 'Yeah, I was one of the five!' So, anyway...that's it. That's the whole story, guys!

**Chase:** This is great. These are so many good anecdotes. Um, I don't know if I had any more questions. Um, I guess part of why we are doing this...I want to ask you about new journalism, digital journalism. Your opinion on that. We have talked a bit about it. You mentioned how you aren't happy, especially in broadcast, how things are going.

**Laura:** Yeah, but what I do think are wonderful are the tools available. When I was at my first job at the L.A. times, I was behind a typewriter with some carbon paper, and that's how we turned in our stories. So weird, and we didn't have any mobile phones. So I'd be covering a fire -- my first assignment at the L.A. Times was to cover a fire, in the mountains north of L.A., and, like, I couldn't get my information down the mountain to anyone because there was no way to communicate until I came off the mountain and gave them my story. So, the tools are wonderful. It's shocking to me that a journalist today can sit at her desk and Google someone and find out about their whole life. I mean, you found out about my background all on the Internet, and it's crazy you can do that. It's incredible.

**Chase:** Like, I got your life story in my PJs with a cup of coffee.

**Laura:** Yeah, exactly. Yeah. It's so weird. Uh, so that's a gift. It's a great thing for journalists. So. Back then it was more of a challenge, a pursuit. Because I was able to go out there with just shoe leather and get information.

**Chase:** Like, that was a skill that you could tap.

**Laura:** Right. Like, literally, I have been in the alley and taken people's garbage, okay. Like, I have done that. 'Cuz you just...those were the tools that were there back then...there weren't many.

**Chase:** You drove seven hours, and convinced a family over tea to give you the story no one else could get.

**Laura:** Yeah, all that kind of stuff. There's some great joy in that. And being at the courthouse -- to get property documents, you would have to sit down and go through microfilm. Years and years of microfilm to find something, and now it's just on the Internet, and it's bizarre. So I think journalism should be even better because you can get things so much faster. You can get the story so much faster, and just go to that next step much more quickly. Yet, the tendency seems to be for it to be more dumbed-down just



because, I guess, they think everyone just wants to hear about the latest shooting as opposed to what's going on at city hall. Plus the two-daily-newspaper wars are over in Dallas and most other big cities. This would be a very fertile time for an ambitious journalist to cover government. I don't think local government is getting covered anymore. You know, the national government is different. There are still plenty of people in Washington to cover stories about the federal government. But I rarely see a good story about what's going on in the nitty-gritty at Dallas City Hall. So much money at stake, and there are so many interesting issues, but it just doesn't get covered anymore.