

Pennsylvania Department of Corrections Employee Oral History Collection Project

Interviewee: Lee Ann Labecki  
Topic: **The 1989 SCI Camp Hill Riots**  
Interview Date: October 3, 2019  
Interviewer: DOC Communications Director Susan McNaughton

**Interview Transcript**

**McNaughton:** Welcome to the Pennsylvania Department of Corrections' Oral History Project where we record the oral histories of current and former DOC employees. I'm DOC Communications Director Susan McNaughton. This oral history focuses on memories from the October 1989 riot at the State Correctional Institution at Camp Hill. Our guest today, October 3, 2019, is Lee Ann Labecki. Thanks for joining us, Lee Ann.



Lee Ann Labecki

**Labecki:** Thank you for having me, Sue.

**McNaughton:** As we begin, could you just provide our listeners with a brief overview of your DOC career?

**Labecki:** Sure. Initially I was in the Management Intern Program, and I did several internships with Ted Shumaker in the Planning, Research & Statistics Office. I loved it so much that, in February of 1989, they had a position open, and I came back as a program analyst. Then, after being there with him, I worked with Ted for a couple of years prior to the riot, and then had the opportunity to move up within the office. When he became executive assistant to the commissioner, I became the chief of that office. Then as the office grew over the years, I became the director.

**McNaughton:** Great. Excellent, and when did you leave?

**Labecki:** In 1998, I took a position with the Governor's Office of Policy.

**McNaughton:** Great. Let's get to the riot. It is 2:30/3 p.m. on Wednesday, October 25, 1989. Where are you and what's happening?

**Labecki:** I was actually in Ted's office on the second floor, and we heard a commotion outside the window. We turned around and saw a lot of inmate flooding into the yard right outside the window there below the tower... right in front of the lunch room/cafeteria.

**McNaughton:** ... at central office.

**Labecki:** At central office, yeah. We stood there for a while, and it became more and more chaotic. It was obvious that there was a problem.

**McNaughton:** That went on through the rest of that evening...

**Labecki:** But it was pretty disturbing. The thing I remember most about that... and at some point, I can't recall... I was trying to think about this... whether we went up to the commissioner's area or not, but I remember Frank Gillis being there with us. There was an officer, in particular, that was on his knees... right inside the gate below the tower... that had a pillowcase over his head or his head was covered. There were about three inmates with him that were swinging a shovel or a pick-axe or something. I just remember being absolutely sick to my stomach that we were going to watch somebody killed directly in front of us. Frank, in particular, was very vocal... very upset that the officer in the tower did not fire a shot. It seemed like it went on for 20 minutes, until finally he did fire a shot. I think I recall Frank running out and telling him to, "Fire! Fire!" I just was only a 26-year-old kid at the time, but that moment is seared in my brain. When I think back to the riot... just that... the inmate swinging that shovel and then laughing. I don't think I'll ever get rid of that picture in my mind.

**McNaughton:** Awful.

**Labecki:** Yeah. It was.

**McNaughton:** That ended that night, and then do you remember going home? What time did you go home?

**Labecki:** I do. It calmed down. I think the other thing... and this probably doesn't mean anything to anybody else. I do remember going home. Ted told me, "Go home. There's really nothing that we could do at that point."

I think the thing I remember going home was... the previous day we had a number of interns that we often took... because I was a management intern and I felt... we liked to have interns come through and rotate with us... the previous day... at the same time... I had four management interns taking a tour of the prison, and around 2:30, we had been at E Gate the previous day. The whole way home, I just kept going through my head, "What if that had been today?" So, it's something over the years... I've thought about.

It's ironic... I'd done some work at Penn State, because my son went to college up there, and I ran into one of the interns who's now a vice president of development at Penn State. He said, "Do you remember when you took me for that tour the day before the riot?" It's funny how things... even these many years... he remembered.

**McNaughton:** Well, sure. He probably turned on the TV and was watching it live thinking, "That could have been them."

**Labecki:** So, you don't realize how many people are touched by things like this.

**McNaughton:** Exactly. Then, the next day... you just came in for your normal work schedule?

**Labecki:** We did. I remember we were compiling reports on overcrowding and other information.

I remember in the months prior to the riot, in central office, we had been preparing a number of planning documents on the level of overcrowding in the system generally. And certain institutions in particular, one of them being Camp Hill, because the people that were long-termers kept saying, "It's not matter of if. It's a matter of when." Because the prisons were so overcrowded.

**McNaughton:** And by long-termers, you mean employees.

**Labecki:** Long-term employees. We had some institutions, like Camp Hill and others, that were at 145% of design capacity and rated capacity we were up to 180... and they were putting beds everywhere... in dorm rooms... in gymnasiums. Ted and I were developing plans with other departmental staff on how to address crowding. We're sending things over to the Governor's Office to make them aware. I remember, after the riot, we were pulling documents together because the Governor's Office wanted to know how can we address... what are we going to do to address the...

**McNaughton:** But you had been warning them for a good while.

**Labecki:** We had been. Hindsight is 20/20.

**McNaughton:** ... and the DOC just didn't have the money. I interviewed Linda Morrison and she said to get equipment and whatever they needed, she was scrounging through state surplus. We just really didn't have any money. Ted, also, talked about the fact that – on a trip to Graterford – he saw all the cots in the gym.

**Labecki:** Yeah. It was... they were putting them everywhere, and I think the other thing that was a problem from a correctional standpoint, was the mixing of populations.

I know in particular at Camp Hill, they were housing a large... about a quarter of the population at that time was parole violators. They had a large number of lifers... I think about 200 lifers. On the other hand, you had about a quarter of the population that were parole violators. And there weren't programs. So, you had about, I think at the time, about 800 offenders that were not programmed... sitting idle.

From a correctional standpoint, anybody who knows correctional theory... that is recipe for disaster. Idle inmates... you've got young, volatile inmates... often parole violators, who are jumpy and aggressive... and then long-term inmates... it's not a good mix from a population standpoint.

**McNaughton:** Right. Tell me how the second night started. Where were you when you learned about it?

**Labecki:** One thing about that second day was how quiet it was. I still remember that. I don't know if anybody else mentioned that. I remember walking out to the car, but it just was so quiet that second day... something didn't seem right. It seemed off.

When the riot broke out that second night, I actually was at home. I remember getting a call from my parents, who were at the Camp Hill Mall. They said, "Something's going on at the prison. There's fire you can see from the parking lot at the mall." If you know the mall... it's right behind the train tracks there.

So, I remember calling Ted and saying, "Do we need to go in?" He said, "No. Don't. At this point they're trying to contain it. It's very... not a good situation." So, that night I did not go in, but I went in early the next morning.

I remember going in at like 5:30 or 6 [a.m.], and coming up over the hill there by the community church... it looked like a war zone. There were Molotov cocktails being thrown through the air. The prison was on fire. You could just see people silhouetted on the top of buildings.

**McNaughton:** Running on the roofs...

**Labecki:** Running on the roofs. And it really looked like scenes that I recall from child... from seeing on TV with Vietnam. It was crazy. Pandemonium.

**McNaughton:** So, you got there probably at the time the state police was just about ready to take it back.

**Labecki:** I did, and I think we went out to your office. We were up there watching when they came in... brought the water cannon in... and then gradually got control... moved in from the two sides and came in, and got the inmates face down and used the zip-lock cuff [flex cuffs] to cuff them up. It was a very intense scene.

**McNaughton:** Tell me... now that it's over... how did it impact your work in the statistics office?

**Labecki:** It was interesting. What I recall was that after the riots, there were all these investigations going on. I know the Adams Commission was convened. So, we provided a lot of data to them to help with the investigation. There was an internal investigation that was put together too. I remember John McCullough and Ken Kyler were brought in, and Ted and I worked with them quite a bit, providing them with information as well.

One of the things we started looking at was the data to see if information reports from Camp Hill... to see if there were anything that was indicated there. When we started collecting the information from the population data... the information from the hearings data... the misconducts data... information from the staff information... the correspondence data... we started seeing some trends that were in the individual reports; and when we put them into the computer and started graphing them, there were a lot of interesting information trends. It looked like if we had actually been able to look at them prior to the incident, we might have said, "Hey, there's something going on here that we should be paying attention to."

**McNaughton:** Now that you've found all that data, what did you do with it to help create a tool that corrections people could use?

**Labecki:** What we did was... we looked at it and we saw that... on the population side... you had a prison that was 187% of capacity. It had 2,500 inmates in a prison that had a rated capacity of 1,800. They had over 1,000 [inmates] double-celled. A lot of people in cells and dorms and modulars. It was an old institution that was designed for youthful offenders. When I grew up there [in the area] in the 70's, it had young offenders in there. So, those things are really spiked.

We looked at staff personnel actions, and there were... was a dramatic increase in the third quarter/fourth quarter with disciplinary actions against the staff... and grievances filed and terminations.

Part of it was that they moved away from manning the towers, because they put the double fence in. So, there were things there that... they had released staff because they didn't need as many people. Staff weren't happy. They didn't have as much overtime, because they didn't need them because they were demanning the towers. Remember... it was a big thing... as we increased security with the fencing, they didn't need the towers manned.

**McNaughton:** Somebody mentioned to me that, at the time, we were also opening facilities -- like Retreat and Smithfield -- and that what happened was a lot of the veteran staff moved on to the other facilities, leaving a less...

**Labecki:** They did, and another thing that we found was that a lot of the younger staff -- because of staff bidding -- ended up on the 2-to-10 shift. So, staff experience was significantly younger on that shift. That was another problem in terms of knowing how to handle what emerged.

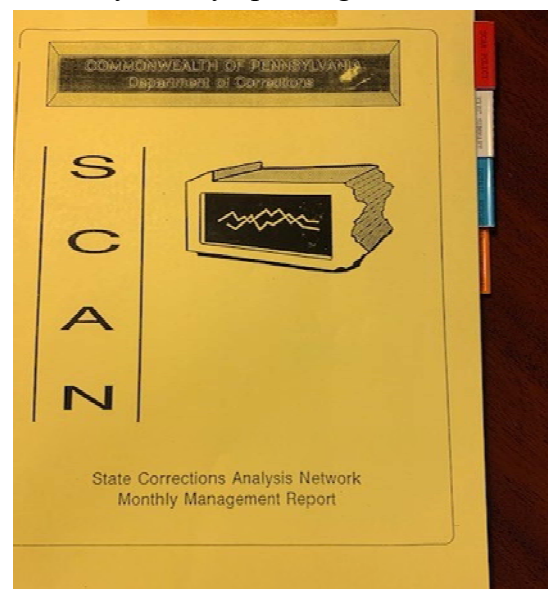
**McNaughton:** And, of course, what I think is interesting, too, is the inmates were watching all of this.

**Labecki:** Exactly. Then they had some other things in terms of institutional climate. You saw that they had the policy with the family picnic suddenly taken away... very upsetting to the inmates. They had a sick leave policy changed abruptly. So, things like that. Initially, during summer, there were increased assaults against staff, but then they declined. But the correspondence... the complaints through the correspondence... by the inmates totally went through the roof. So, these were things that, again, if you did not have siloed systems, you would have seen it.

So, basically, what we recommended, and what Ken [Kyler] and John [McCullough] had recommended, is... we need to put an integrated system together. That really was the impetus for developing the SCAN system.

**McNaughton:** Tell us what SCAN stands for.

**Labecki:** SCAN is State Corrections Analysis Network.



We had actually started looking at developing an integrated system... Andy Kyser, who was an IT coordinator at SCI Cresson at the time... in April, we started looking at what other states were doing, and we started seeing what we could do.

Looking at the data from Camp Hill, we decided we needed to accelerate it. I think in January of 1990, Commissioner Owens had sent a letter out [memo to DOC staff] saying we're going to get a team together from institutions and the department to take a look at developing it. Then, by the end of that year, we had developed an approach, and implemented the policy in the following year. I believe they still have a climate indicator system today, some 30 years later.

Basically, what it did was it monitored information across all of the major departments in an integrated way. And we looked at statistical band of normality. So, if something went outside of a causal range, what was change, we would force a communication between the institution and the department and say, "We see a spike in assaults. We see a spike in correspondence in this area. Is there something going on?" It just helped to force that communication, because prior to that, I think there... you know, a lot of times, institutions are sort of on an island. It really just was to help people take a look at things that they might not otherwise see.

**McNaughton:** Great. Then I hear that you received documentation from a long-time superintendent... well-respected Dr. Joseph Mazurkiewicz, from Rockview, who said that the tool was helpful.

**Labecki:** Yeah. When I was pulling things together to meet with you... it's interesting – as being a policy/research person – I tend to keep things, and it must have meant something to me. It obviously did, but I found a note from Doc Joe talking about the value of the system. It was helping to provide some clarity and helped them to keep an eye on things that they might not otherwise do. That obviously meant a lot.

**McNaughton:** Absolutely. Tell me how your work in this area was used to help other states.

**Labecki:** After the riot... Camp Hill became something that other states were interested in. We were contacted by the National Institute of Corrections and asked to help put together and be part of their rising control course that they do for other superintendents and staff.

For several years we were part of that and helped them to teach other superintendents how to develop a key indicator system. We talked about what happened at Camp Hill... what we found and also walked through a process of how you develop these systems... different ways states have developed them and the process of putting them together and implementing them.

We feel like what we learned at Camp Hill... we shared with other states, and we shared it with some military institutions as well. It had some widespread impact on other institutions nationally.

**McNaughton:** So, while it was very traumatic, a lot of good came out of it.

**Labecki:** Absolutely. Absolutely, and it's interesting, because having that experience, I've used that throughout my career... when I went to the Governor's Office... Policy Office. I implemented similar systems there for other cabinet agencies, and with my work at KPMG, I've done that with other agencies as well.

The principles are the same whether you are in corrections or somewhere else. You want to give decision makers the information they need to quickly understand what's going on in their agencies and to proactively address it. It has application whether it's in corrections or welfare, or any other agency.

**McNaughton:** Wow. Thank you for your work, because it's very important.

**Labecki:** I appreciate it. It's been a passion of love. To see that it's still used in some way here... it's very rewarding, because it protects staff and it protects the offender population as well.

**McNaughton:** And the community.

**Labecki:** Absolutely.

**McNaughton:** Because if that had... if that one vehicle had breached the fence, we would have had a huge community problem.

**Labecki:** And I think, Sue, it's even more important as technology has become more proliferated, because what I've seen in the following 30 years... there's so much data now, and there's no way that people can manage all that by manually reviewing it.

Now, with the bigger computer systems and data mining and automated intelligence, you have the ability to mine that data and really have *it* tell you what are the things that you should be looking at. There's no way that a person can manually do that. It becomes even more important with today's automated systems.

**McNaughton:** Right.

**McNaughton:** What else did you want to share?

**Labecki:** I think what's interesting, too... not only what happened, but how... it's an interesting thing that I think after the riot... all the good that came out of it.

We were very fortunate. I think everybody would acknowledge it.

I enjoyed reading the transcripts from the other people you've talked to.

But the good that came out of something really bad... the fact that nobody was killed is a tremendous outcome, obviously. But, from something bad, some really good things came, and I thought I would just touch on them.

In pulling some information [for this interview], there's really seven things that came out of the riot... after the disturbance.

In April 1990, when Commissioner Lehman was brought in after a national search. It really started the change in the structure of the department. I know you're going to do a thing on the history of the department, but it sort of really changed how the department looks and how it is today.

One of the things we see after reviewing all the investigations on the riot... The Adams Commission, the internal one, the Senate and the House... is that this is a treatment vs. operation clash. And that led to communications struggles and struggles in the prison, and the inmates felt that.

One of the first changes that Commissioner Lehman made was to eliminate that and we're going to go to a regional geographic break of the department and move towards institutional centralized inmate services vs institutional management.

So, you get away from the treatment/operations... we're going towards an inmate-focused and institutional management-focused... and then we are going to organize our department... our institutions around geographic splits and get away from that us vs. them mentality.

So, that was a huge change, and we still have that today.

**McNaughton:** Yes.

**Labecki:** I think the second thing was to improve the inter-institutional and department communications, and that was done through the SCAN system... looking at climate and forcing communications, and we talked about that.

The third thing was to say that you have the improved readiness of staff. Even though we did have CERT teams, they weren't fully developed like they are [now]. I know you talked to... that Secretary Beard talked about this, and JD [Shutt] and probably Bill Sprenkle with the training academy, but we got a grant from NIC. We got equipment to train our staff and put a formalized training program together for CERT. We made sure our people had the curriculum and the training and the equipment they need to protect their institutions and know how to respond. And they held regular emergency drills. That wasn't really in place before that, so that was a huge professional step forward.

The fourth thing for emergency preparedness... was to develop professional standards, policies and procedures. I'm sure, talking to JD [Shutt], he probably spoke to this, but part of that – we had policies, but they weren't sort of formalized and standardized.

I remember JD coming in, and by the time he left, he probably had a stack of policy binders the length of your desk here. Checklists... very organized... standardized, and that whole process led us to being able to move toward ACA accreditation for all of our institutions.

It was a mammoth undertaking to redo ALL of the policies... not just the ones around emergency preparedness and MOUs with all the local officials and state police and PEMA, but across ALL of our policies. It was a MAJOR undertaking. I don't know that people think about that happened after the Camp Hill riots.

**McNaughton:** We have thousands of policies.

**Labecki:** I know, but we rewrote ALL of them.

**McNaughton:** Wow.



**Labecki:** The fifth was recognizing the specific security deficiencies after Camp Hill, was to move toward hard concrete modular units and cells. Doing that... looking at designing exercise yards, by having interior fencing, and making sure that there was exterior perimeter lighting. So, that was something that was done at Camp Hill.

And then, following that, recognizing that the prison population was not going to abate in any way... the department launched the biggest construction ever in the history; and by 1997, added 10,000 cells through the prototypical prison expansion effort... and Curtis Pulitzer... a national architect recognized in corrections was brought in. We got a committee together on prototypicals, and basically, guided our development of prison construction across the state.

It was a mammoth undertaking, and all these things happening at the same time.

Then, I think the final thing was to be more proactive in shaping the policies that impact the department. Joe Lehman created the executive deputy commissioner position, so that that deputy sort of oversaw all; the managing of the institutions and the department internally, and he [Lehman, the commissioner] became more proactive on the hill... helping to shape the legislation that impacted us. Because during the 1980s and 1990s, you got slammed with the mandatory sentences and the enhancements for weapons, and everything else, which led to the overcrowding. But by getting more involved in influencing on the hill, you could change some of those.

**McNaughton:** We didn't have a voice at the time.

**Labecki:** We did not, and he was the first one that really gave us a voice. I think all of our commissioners and secretaries ... have been champions. You had Marty Horn, and you had Jeff Beard, and now Secretary Wetzel. All of them have been advocates, and I think we've been... it would be hard to argue that any department in the nation has had the list of excellent secretaries that we've had.

Starting with all of this, in a way, is a result of the riot. It's amazing all the things that were done following it. It's absolutely... I reread this the other night when I knew I was coming in... it boggles your mind.

**McNaughton:** Right.

**Labecki:** So, I think it's absolutely incredible that the Phoenix rises, but absolutely incredible that we were rewriting security responses, organizational structure, policies, construction, training and legislative approach all came out of something so terrible. Pretty amazing.

**McNaughton:** It is amazing. Wow. This has been wonderful.

**Labecki:** Well, it's different ... but like I said, a 26-year-old kid... eyes open... mouth closed... it was an incredible thing to live through, and it certainly has shaped my career. It is something you won't ever forget. I'm sure you too. ... we were kids at the time.

**McNaughton:** Right.

**Labecki:** It was an incredible... that, and I think certainly shaped the history of this department.

**McNaughton:** And set us up for success.

**Labecki:** It did. In a strange way it did.

**McNaughton:** Yeah.

**Labecki:** It's a legacy for this department that was terrible, but that set a lot of positive things up.

**McNaughton:** Amazing. Anything else you want to share?

**Labecki:** I just commend you for doing this. This is a mammoth undertaking, and it's hard to believe it's 30 years, but I know it's hard for you to go through this as well.

**McNaughton:** Well, thank you.

**Labecki:** It does bring back some bad memories, but I think it's very good to reflect. It's always good to reflect, and then to look back and look forward, it's always a positive thing.

**McNaughton:** Great. Thanks, Lee Ann.

**Labecki:** Absolutely.

END