



**Laurie Ann Ashdown**  
**ROBS History Project**  
**January 18, 2001 65**

Known by colleagues in Brentwood as Ann, today's guest, Laurie Ann Ashdown revealed her full given name that includes her mother's name Ann and Laurie, that of her maternal grandmother. She's now living alone as a widow who has one son, John Lawrence Ashdown who's married to Cheryl and living in Ronkonkoma with Ann's three grandchildren. Like Ann was, he's still employed by the Brentwood School District and is in charge of the Athletic Division of the Loretta Park warehouse. Ann's husband sadly pre-deceased her on New Year's Eve 1981, when he was also employed by the District. People watching this interview or reading its' transcript will remember him as "*Al, the Merry Mailman*". He worked in the Mail Department from 1962 until his passing. She met Al on a blind date when Ann lived in Williston Park and he still lived in Hempstead. A friend who worked with them both then arranged their date. It was a blind date and as their luck had it, they '*hit it off*' immediately. They'd been married for twenty-eight years. Anne said he was a man who never complained about anything that was bothering him. She thought that might have been because he had a mother-in-law who was somewhat of a hypochondriac. When he finally did complain it was too late. He didn't know that he had bone cancer and was gone within six months. He passed far too quickly for her. They had made all sorts of plans to retire together and had given thought to all the things they were going to do. They were looking forward to enjoying their retirements but were unable to realize a single one of their dreams.

Anne's son attended school in Brentwood up through the seventh grade when things began to change for them and he was enrolled in Eastern Military Academy, a prestigious Private School in Cold Spring Harbor from which he graduated. Sadly, and like so much of old Long Island, it no longer exists but lives on only in memory, having been repurposed as the spectacular site for weddings and other special occasions that it remains.

Cheryl Ashdown and husband John Lawrence Ashdown have three children as explained earlier. The eldest is Nicole who was nineteen at the time of her grandmother's interview, Christa was fourteen and their younger brother John Jr. was eleven years old. *"I think my granddaughters are gorgeous and my grandson is handsome. I'm lucky to be their grandmother"*.

Nicole and Christa used to love to dance and they attended a School for Dance; Suzanne's Dance. Nicole graduated from Ross High School two years ago. *"Christa and Johnny go to Connetquot . I think that's where they're going now and Christa was into dancing. Johnny likes soccer and sports. Right now he has one of those scooters I'm not too happy about but he's pretty cautious on it. "*

*"My son loved sports when he was younger. He joined the football team didn't really pursue the competitive edge that some kids follow. The television was always on and carrying professional sports but Johnny was never too active in sports he was more an observer fan than an active participant in the games."*

When asked, Ann confessed to a love of ballroom dancing. Her husband had been more into sports and was even into semi-pro baseball at one point in his life when he lived in Hempstead. Remembering back to school she thought that she was a "normal" kid. She was interested in "Church" and went to Christian Endeavor Meetings. She even taught Sunday School for a while once she became a member of the church. She did school plays and church things, you know, she more or less hung with her own crowd that they had, and it was the 'the church group'.

She couldn't remember this but was told by her mother and others that her father once took her up in a bi-plane for her first ride in an airplane. She told us, "*I loved to fly*". My mother didn't want me to go but my father wanted to take his daughter up in an airplane. We went up somewhere on Long Island but she didn't remember where. He was learning to fly at one time but gave it up when he married my mother. She didn't want him flying any more. In those days flying was more dangerous than it is today. There were small independent airports all over Long Island but I don't remember where we took off and landed.

Ann was born July 26, 1930 in Forest Hills, Queens at Jamaica Hospital. She lived in Forest Hills until she was two years old when they moved to Baisley Park in South Jamaica. Her father had enlisted in the National Guard and in 1940 his regiment was called up for active duty for fifteen months. He was supposed to be discharged on December 15<sup>th</sup> 1941, but the War broke out on December 7<sup>th</sup> 1941 and he didn't come home for five years. He was in the service all that time and the whole while Ann continued to live in Forest Hills. They moved from Forest Hills in 1949.

Her father's regiment was activated right away. His discharge papers that applied to December 15<sup>th</sup> were immediately torn up. She remembers that date so well because her dad was in the military band and they were playing for Burgess Meredith who was doing different USO shows at different military bases. Her dad's band was playing in the studio and my dad told us later the announcer came in and told the guys, "*Hey Guys, We're at War! He heard it right, right away.*" And then they announced it on the radio and I being my father's daughter, I was listening to him and they came over the radio saying that Pearl Harbor had been attacked and we were at war. I went in and she was doing the dishes with my Aunt and I told her, "*Mom, We're at War.*" I remember my mother – my father called five minutes later after the program was over. My mother picks up the phone and says, "*You don't have to tell me.*" She says, "*I know. You're not coming home.*" You were actually listening to your dad on the radio in the studio performing at the moment the whole world learned that we were at war with the Japanese? Yes. He was a French horn player and he was in a good Military Band.

My Dad was born in the United States but my mother was born in Greenock, Scotland and her maiden name had been Savage. She arrived in America in 1926. She met my dad and they got married in 1929. My father was a Connecticut "Yankee" and been born somewhere in Connecticut. His parents had both been born here. My husband's grandparents, one was Welch and had been born in Wales and the other came from England. I didn't know my mother's grandmother. She was alive but she lived in England. Ann and I spoke of all those kids we know of today who have never known their grandparents or even met their great grandparents and how fortunate we are to have been able not just to know our own parents, our grandparents but also to have met, come to know and remember knowing our great grandparents. How fortunate indeed we are to have been blessed with such knowledge *during our lives*. That has been one of the things she said, she'd been grateful for. Her son got to know both sets of grandparents and hear stories that they told of their lives and experiences. Does she sit and tell her grandchildren stories and answer their questions? She said she does. It enriches our own experience as well as that of the children in our lives when we pass on memories we hold dear.

We asked her to tell us, *"What kind of dad was your father? What kind of a guy was he? We know from what you've told us that he was a French horn player and a military band musician."* This is what she told us: *"He never got shipped overseas. He was stationed right down here in Sandy Hook....at Fort Hancock...Even though he was a serious military man did he ever see active military service in World War II? She said he did not. He was next shipped out to Little Rock Arkansas, from which he was ultimately discharged from Service. Prior to his military service he had been a career employee of Consolidated Energy in New York City. He was with them for thirty-seven years. He had been with them before his military service and returned to them after the war. He was there through the forties and the fifties, retired came to Brentwood and then died in 1965. As she said about him, "he knew electricity from the pole in."* He was a tease. "He would say something to me and I would say" *I believe him*", and he would say, *"Oh, little girls believe everything their father tells them."* Then I would

look at him and he would have this smirk on his face” and I’d say, Oh Daddy! He was a good man!

Oh, he loved the music. He didn’t only play with large orchestras. Before he married my mother he used to play with a band that performed over the radio at the “*Tea Garden*” in Jamaica, I don’t think it’s there anymore. Then of course when he married my mother he gave up performing with the band. Then he went into the National Guard and went into the band there. That was during the twenties and thirties. That was the Swing Era and it was most certainly his time. Although he loved music and especially military music his favorite military march was The Colonel Bogey. His favorite lyrics to that march can be found on YouTube today.

What about your mom? *“Mom was always there. There’s not much that I can say about her because she was always there. If I had to cry or I had to complain, she was always there. She was not one for hitting me. Her biggest punishment for me when I was a little girl was to make me sit in the middle of the kitchen floor on a chair and not move”*. It had not bothered her at all not having a brother or a sister because she knew that her mother couldn’t have any more children.

Life was good growing up in her family. She felt she was very close to both her mother and her father. Her mother took a defense plant job when the war first broke out while her dad was away. At that time they were living with a great aunt and uncle. They were good to her and she was never really alone or left alone. She couldn’t go out and do whatever she wanted. That was not allowed. But she had a good life and when her father was home on leave my mother always included me. *“She would always get tickets to go to Broadway Shows and things like that but I always was with them. It wasn’t a thing that it was always she and my father. We were a family. On my block in Forest Hills there was no one my age to play with but I had friends from my classes in school. We used to walk back and forth and stuff and go to one another’s houses”*.

When I first got out of high school I went to work in the telephone company and I was in the information bureau. They worked out of 18<sup>th</sup> Street in New York. Then I transferred out to Hempstead. That's where I met my husband. Ann was an Operator at that time although she became an *Intercept Clerk* when a number was changed they had to manually update the system at the end of each day. Ann thought the system had surely changed since then and in fact she hadn't been back to visit the old neighborhood at all because she knew there was no longer anybody there that they once knew. Where their house once stood there is now an apartment. Forest Hills she said, "*is all changed*".

They've been showing an awful lot of the old neighborhood on television this week since Queens Boulevard has been receiving a lot of attention on the NEWS due to the many crashes and pedestrian injuries being reported lately in the media. Ann used to live walking distance away from Queens Boulevard when it was her home. She said the traffic was always like that. You would always take your life in your hands just to cross the Boulevard. There was nothing new about that. Well, she said, "*I never did*". *I lived right near the Continental Railroad Station, so I used to go down one side and underneath Queens Boulevard and come up on the other side*". *Did she have chores as an only child that she was assigned growing up? She always did her own laundry. When she moved into Forest Hills she was just ten. So I wasn't given jobs to do and my Great Aunt who was living with us had someone come in and clean the house, So, I didn't have to do that. I did have to make my own bed! But, no. I didn't have to do too much in the way of chores.*

*"I graduated from Forest Hills High School. Oh, and yes I went to P.S. 3 in Forest Hills and I went to P.S. 101 where I graduated from 8<sup>th</sup> Grade. That was before they introduced the idea of Junior High Schools. The whole idea of Junior High's was just starting when I was in school. I went from the 6<sup>th</sup> Grade in P.S. 3 to 101 across the Boulevard, for 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> Grades which then became the Junior High years. My favorite subjects at that time included History which I loved. I still do love history and I was always good in Math. In P.S. 101 I had Miss Mc Donald. The other thing I had in 101 was I had my Step Great Grandmother as a teacher*

*there. So I had it a little hard. The teachers expected me to be super smart. Forget it!"*

When I met my husband I became a baseball fan because he was an avid Brooklyn Dodger fan. But I became a Giants fan just to give him a little bit of a hard time. When the Giants went out to San Francisco my husband got it because they were losing money here in New York. That was when the Dodgers moved out to Los Angeles and *"my husband was very upset because they were making money here. Why did they do that----just because the Giants were out there?"* So he became a Mets fan when they built Shea Stadium. He couldn't be a Giants fan. He didn't like them anymore but he definitely retained his love for the game. He became a big Mets fan.

At the time of the Kennedy assassination I was not working for the District yet. My husband was and he was trying to get me in. I was working at Fabric City it was a materials retail establishment. The school district changed the rules about that time for eligibility to become a Clerical. They made it mandatory to pass a Civil Service Test first. She had to wait until she qualified.

Did she consider herself a morning or a night person? *"I get up at about 7:30 or eight o'clock. Before that I used to get up at 530 am because I had to go to work in Queens. The beauty of retirement is I don't have to set the alarm any more. I just wake up and get up. She enjoys the warmer weather best; spring, summer, early fall. While she loves to garden she has been unable to do it for the last couple of years but is looking forward to getting back into the garden this year.*

In 1949 she moved with her parents to Williston Park. That was when she met her husband. After they were married they lived in the beginning with her mother and father for a while and long enough to save money needed to buy their own house. They moved to Brentwood in June of 1957. They've lived there ever since. It was where they found the house they liked. At first they found a house they liked in East Islip but the bank turned them down because they didn't

think they'd be able to sell it. It was only four rooms without a basement but *"It was what we thought we could afford" but the bank wouldn't approve it. They said it was because the house didn't have a double floor* We ended up choosing a Chapel Hill house though at first we thought we'd buy a house at Robin Hill in North Brentwood. These were the years when Brentwood developments were building houses as fast as mushrooms would grow. Applegate was here. There were so many developments to choose from. Chapel Hill was up on Motor Parkway. The Saturday before her husband and she were going to come out to Brentwood to sign a contract for the house, Chapel Hill came out with a model they called the "Fashion Ranch" which had an attached garage, a basement and a dining room which I had been used to having. I grew up with a dining room. I wanted my son to grow up having a dining room in the house. We came out and were one of the first families to buy *The Fashion Ranch*. They were very exciting times indeed. Brentwood was growing by leaps and bounds. Those were the days when schools were being added to the district at a rate of more than one a year. Her son ended up attending North Elementary School. When Ann came to the District they had just opened Twin Pines. There were four schools going up then; Twin Pines, Hemlock, Laurel and East Junior High. That was about when they stopped building. The District had reached an enrollment of 23,000 students K -12 and they were the 6<sup>th</sup> largest public school district in the State of New York. She was here to watch it happen. It was the time of full time day school with double sessions and overlap session and evening school. Her son began with ½ day session at North Elementary that became full time later on.

When you applied for employment with the District you were interviewed by Frank Mauro who was then the Business Manager. *"When I was hired, Frank and his wife Carol, all of us from the Pine Park Warehouse used to go out together, and Frank and his wife used to go with us. Frank was more or less at that time a friend but he was at the same time, our Boss. When I applied to take the test I did not apply for the typing exam. I applied to take the Clerks Exam. He sent me to Dick Avis and it may have been Al Grabowski, but I'm not sure about that. He sat me down at the typewriter and I didn't do very well. Mr. Avis sent me back to Frank Mauro and I told Frank. He wants a typist and I can't type. I surely*



*can't type fast. So then I ended up at the East Warehouse under Harry Hamilton. She didn't know if anyone would even remember him."*

*"My job there was clerical in nature. I entered data into ledgers; compiling inventory and things like that. I think I was only there for about one month because my husband had been working under Don Vlaun and he had told Don about me working up at the warehouse and at the time Buildings and Grounds needed another Secretary, so I was transferred to the Buildings and Grounds Department and I was there until I retired. It was great for me because we were always busy. There was never a dull moment. We used to all get together on a Sunday night, just to have a good time; to dance, joke around, play charades things like that. We had good times together. Brentwood was like a large extended family. It may have changed now but it once was a large and very close knit social network. At that time we were all very close."*

I worked with Don Vlaun and when he retired John Hines became the Superintendent of Buildings and Grounds and I worked for him. After he got booted out - (don't want to get into that) – Ken Stubbalo took over. I worked for him until 1985 when I retired.

I was a member of CSEA when Frank D'Andrea was President of CSEA. That was when the men and the girls were all together as one Unit. I was Corresponding Secretary. Then of course, when the Teamsters came in and the men went with the Teamsters, the girls stayed with CSEA. My husband, and a good friend of ours, Godfrey Miller were the last two to sign with the Teamsters because they wanted to remain with CSEA and the Teamsters are still here. My son is a member of the Teamsters. The only employees still with CSEA are the Teachers Aides. The girls I believe are with the Teachers Group, ie. BTA, NYSUT Union. *"I've always felt and I still do, when you're all together, you're better. You have more freedom to speak up and speak out. But they didn't go that way."* Now, in terms of our cohesiveness as a unit *"I've always called them my boys from Buildings and Grounds. All of them, the ground crew, the maintenance men, these are all guys that I hired, I did a lot of the paperwork on a lot of them, on most of*

*them. I still consider them my boys. There has been closeness – there it is family!”*  
*“We watch out for one another. My office was right upstairs. They were right below me. We had the ground crew, the garage, the custodial warehouse, every one of them came out of our Department. We had to maintain the schools and the grounds and keep the supplies in there.”* Some of us will remember during the early years when mistakes were made from which a degree of controversy ensued. There were newspaper articles and you all were probably right in the middle of it. Every day there would be another reporter at a Board Meeting or asking questions and looking for answers to this or that inquiry. We did have the “bulldozer thing”. That was the bulldozer that was upstate and alleged to be used building a swimming pool someplace. That was Tony LaValle who was clearing his ground and Donald Vlaun who had given him permission and Sam Klee, George Igeell was involved there too. Then local people began to lose trust in a few of the people who were making supervisory decisions and more questions began to be asked about other issues. There was a sudden interest in “*the site*”. Michael Grant was the one who was interested in that. He and George Leggio had had a feud going between them and it boiled over from things related to the Brentwood Fire Department that involved legitimate and lawful activities at the site that were suspected as being part of some operation that was suddenly suspect.

*“In those days Buildings and Grounds used to purchase used materials and vehicles from surplus United States Army overstock. So called Army Surplus was cheaper and met District needs for additional vehicles at a time when the need for additional supplies of that nature was great. However, what we learned from that experience was that if and when they broke down the district was not allowed by law to simply junk them. Also they were not allowed to sell them or voluntarily give them away for any reason. They were told that the only option when the need for them expired was to bury them in the ground so they could never be used again by anyone for any reason and to do otherwise would be a violation of federal law and subject the district subject to criminal prosecution under the statute. Mike Grant who was then Speaker of the Republican Assembly in Albany got hold of it and made a big stink in the papers about it. It was a so called tempest in a teapot but for some people made interesting tabloid political fodder*

*at the time. Several vehicles were ultimately legally unearthed that had been buried at the site but interest in the story was soon pushed aside by more serious concerns as life in Brentwood settled back to normal”.*

Retiring when I did, I was only fifty-five and I couldn't collect on my husband's Social Security until I was sixty. That meant I was only able to collect from my pension on the house. Fortunately my husband had the kind of insurance coverage that upon his death left the house free and clear. I still had to pay taxes and I had to cover the upkeep on the house. So I got my Scots temper up and put in for the three year incentive. As I said, it was a mistake, and I shouldn't have done it. The year as I've said, was 1985. Fortunately, my good friend Godfrey Mailer, President of CSEA and his wife were able to set me up with a Part Time job with CSEA at the Union Office Local 870. So that really helped me out by pulling me out of the hole I had fallen into. Otherwise, I would really have been hurting financially. When I first called Social Security about my husband dying, they told me that when I was sixty I would be eligible to apply for his Social Security. I should not have put in my papers as fifty-five, instead I should have waited until I was sixty. As impetuous as your decision might have been you were dissatisfied with changes that were occurring so your decision was more than understandable given the totality of your personal situation. The number of years she worked for the Brentwood School District had been nineteen and a half years. She had absolutely no interest in taking other employment while she was with the district.

*“Maybe it was because of the Department I was in but I really enjoyed my job and what I was doing there. There was never a dull moment. We were always busy. I did enjoy it and besides my husband was part of the department. My son was part of the department too. Then I worked for CSEA for nine years. The Union Office was on the corner of Moffit Boulevard and Axinn Avenue in Islip. I worked there until the President was voted out of office in the next election. The new President didn't like me consequently my employment was terminated in 1995”.* At that point I was financially secure so I was okay with the way it all worked out. I was fine with it. I have grandchildren that are important to me and family that I love but I find that I've become very lazy. I've also had some health issues that

have required my attention. I have arthritis in my left knee which has caused my right hip to go out of alignment which eventually caused the left hip to go out. That caused me to have had two replacement operations right there. I was operated on in April for the right hip and operated on in July for the left hip. I've been told that it will take six months before I'm fully healed. Another thing that happened was that I had to give up smoking. I'd given up smoking once before and I knew how difficult it was going to be. My husband was sick and when he came out of the hospital I stopped smoking for him. But then I got very depressed one night after he died and my daughter-in-law had left her pack of cigarettes in the house and she said *"I'm giving up cigarettes for Lent. And I said "Okay," and she left them there and I started smoking them because I got depressed and continued smoking again until a year ago November."* That's when I thought I was having a heart attack. I was going from one room to the other and I couldn't catch my breath. I had somebody coming into the house to do my shopping for me and I told her get my son on the phone and tell him to get here and get me an ambulance. I think I'm having a heart attack. Well, that's when I found out my lungs are clear and I have a weak heart but it's nothing to be worried about. Of course I'm taking all sorts of medication and I had to stop smoking. We said, "It's one of the best gifts you've given yourself". *She said," I'm going to be honest, I miss smoking". My granddaughter came up to visit me in the hospital the first time and she said to me, "Grandma, I'll stop smoking if you will."*? *I said, Okay. I'll make a deal with you. And we made a deal."*

Do you read? Do you enjoy reading? Yes, occasionally. *Is there any one book that comes to mind? "The only books that I really loved the most were books by Albert Payson Terhune, like, The Heart of a Dog, and Eric Knight's , Lassie Come Home. I love reading books about dogs. I have a dog that I have spoiled to the core. I'm a dog lover. She's a Collie Sheppard mixture. She's a brat. It's all my fault 'cause, I've spoiled her. I used to have favorite movie stars like Cary Grant, and John Payne. I always thought my husband resembled John Payne and Kirk Douglass. I liked all of them. What do you miss about the job? "I miss being around the guys. If you could do anything differently what would you do? "The*

*only thing I would do differently is to have my husband with me now. I do miss him"*