

Holly Hegeman interviews Laura Glading for her Lounge Lizard Transcripts:

Editor's Note: This week we bring you yet another one of our infamous Lounge Lizard Transcripts.

The subject of this LLT is Laura Glading, President of the Association of Professional Flight Attendants. We met with Laura last week at the APFA headquarters in Euless, TX.

Some of you may find it interesting that I had never met Laura before the press conference in February announcing the deal between US Airways and American Airlines.

Even though I had never met her, however, it had been clear to me throughout the merger process that Laura, and the steadfastness of the flight attendant union and its commitment to the belief that a merger was in the best interest of the employees at American -- was a major reason the merger between American Airlines and US Airways did, finally, come together.

After my interview with Laura, I am that much more convinced this is the case. If there is one theme that permeated our talk last week it was this: many things had to be done differently. And Laura and APFA did just that.

PBB: Thank you Laura for taking the time to talk to me today. I know it is a madhouse for you these days.

Laura: It's always a madhouse. Thank you for asking me. I am honored. It's kind of like being asked to be on the "David Letterman" show.

PBB: Well, I don't know about that. But it is a rather grueling process, so I appreciate you taking the time to sit here with me today. So first, we need to let PBB subscribers get to know you a little better. And me too for that matter. So let's start with the basics. You are President of the APFA. That means that you are a flight attendant. When did you become a flight attendant and have you always worked for American Airlines?

Laura: I began working for American Airlines right after I graduated from college in 1978. My first job at American was working at the ticket counter at JFK and then I began flying in 1979.

PBB: Why did you become a flight attendant?

Laura: You know, I had no intention of getting into the airline industry. I had no idea of what I wanted to do. But a couple of things were happening at the time. First, my parents were retiring to Florida. I have a large family, and they were taking some of my younger siblings with them, and I missed them terribly. So, first, it was a way to travel, a way to keep in touch

with them. But essentially I guess I looked at the job as a "placekeeper." Something I could do while I decided where I wanted to go and what I wanted to do.

PBB: So you did not think of this as a long-time career move.

Laura: No. I got involved fully thinking I would be moving on to other things at some point. You know, I started at the ticket counter, and that was hard work. But my manager there suggested that I should apply to be a flight attendant -- said I would be a good fit. So I applied.

PBB: And the rest is history.

Laura: And so here I am -- still!

PBB: You said you come from a large family. And you were born in New York?

Laura: Yes. My parents are both from New York. In fact, you could say they began "dating" at a Halloween party in the sixth grade. Most of my aunts and uncles met in elementary school as well. At one point we all lived in the same apartment complex in Woodside, Queens, before everyone started moving around. That is where I grew up.

PBB: You went to college in New York--

Laura: Yes, I attended St. John's University. I was married in 1983, and in 1985, I moved to Westchester County. [New York] And that is where I have remained. I guess you could say I haven't really ventured very far! I mean, I've traveled a lot but I haven't moved very far from where I grew up.

PBB: While we are on the subject of your family, I have to ask you about your cousin. I was recently at the ISTAT Conference in Orlando, and it was there that I found out that Tom Weir, who is treasurer of US Airways, is your first cousin. I had no idea. We talked a great deal about how you two had essentially had to stop talking to one another for much of last year. I can only imagine. He also says he has lots of incriminating stories he could tell me about you.

Laura: Yes, well I could tell stories on him as well.

PBB: So I imagine that all of this was disclosed as the merger process began to heat up. But it must have been difficult -- as your mother and his mother are sisters, is that correct?

Laura: So yeah. Tom lived in Woodside, Queens. That's funny. Because the first time I met with [US Airways' President] Scott Kirby at the now infamous dinner at Oceana in New York City, one of the first things he said to me was, "We sat down with Tom Weir and asked him a couple of things about you."

And I said, "If you are going to start this meeting by telling me embarrassing stories from my childhood, it's probably not a very good start." I literally grew up with Tom and his family. We are all very close. Our mothers are sisters and speak just about daily. So, needless to say this was an interesting part of this process, because they both felt like they were a part of "the team." My aunt and my mother. My mother would call and give her opinion and her impression of what was going on and then she would tell me what she and my aunt thought should be done. "We were just thinking...."

I just had to tell her, "Mom, stay out of it!"

PBB: So it became a family affair.

Laura: Oh, my eyes would just roll back into my head when she would start.

PBB: But Tom told me that you two had a major "Chinese firewall" in place in terms of discussing what was going on.

Laura: Yes, Tom, or "Tommy", as the folks at US Airways have begun to call him, and I have been very disciplined in not talking about any of this.

Interestingly, in the summer of 2011, when I suspected that bankruptcy was on the horizon for American and I had heard rumors about US Airways, our family had its usual family reunion. I did not attend. But at one point my mother called and she put Tom on the phone. He told me then that even though he had always fully disclosed that he and I were first cousins, that for some reason, he had just come from a conference, and apparently something had clicked. [With the folks from American] And all of a sudden, he said that they seemed to be very uncomfortable saying things in front of him.

PBB: But nothing had changed with you two? You hadn't discussed anything with him about what was going on at American right?

Laura: No. But then someone from American asked me about him. I thought it was all rather silly. In fact, I think there were folks at American who suspected that the two of us somehow started this whole thing.

But I can tell you this was not the case. But from that point forward, we didn't speak about it. When we talked in August and he told me about the situation, I jokingly accused him of trying to distance himself from me, but actually we did pretty much stop talking to each other.

PBB: So there were Chinese firewalls put into place.

Laura: Exactly.

PBB: Did you choose not to attend the family reunion because of this?

Laura: No, no. I did not go that year because I thought it was important to make a series of base visits that summer. I thought that flight attendants were still under the impression that we were trying to negotiate an industry-leading contract, and that they somehow still worked for this great company. There was this isolation thing going on.

PBB: But you knew otherwise.

Laura: Yes. I knew that American was in grave financial danger and that there was a strong possibility of bankruptcy. I also knew that if I said this in a hotline, or I wrote about it in an article, or if I said anything publicly, it would not be a good thing.

So we did base visits. We did them very differently than we had done them in the past. They were very small groups. We didn't record them. Or publish them. And I had pre-meetings with the representatives of each base the night before.

PBB: I would imagine that the folks at the meetings brought up the subject of bankruptcy without you having to even talk about it.

Laura: Inevitably. I knew that at every meeting someone would bring it up, or weasel it in to the discussion. I thought it was only fair to let them know that yes, there was a strong possibility this was going to happen. So I told them, look, if you are thinking about buying a car, or a home, this is a real possibility.

I also, to be honest, thought I was a lame duck. I did not think I was going to run again for President. So I had nothing to lose. I could be the bearer of bad news and tell people 1) we're not going to get an industry-leading contract 2) we're probably going to go into bankruptcy and 3) you're probably going to have to buckle down, it's going to be a tough year. But yes, I felt I had a responsibility to tell them and it was safe to tell them because hell, I wasn't going to run again.

PBB: Why didn't you think you were going to run again?

Laura: I don't know. First, very few people run for a second term. I knew that people were very angry. I didn't know if there was a possibility of winning, and quite frankly, it's very draining -- this job.

I had spent the four years of the presidency during my son's four years of high school. He was going into his senior year, and I wanted to spend some time with him. And I knew that my husband and my son would not be supportive if I ran again. So I guess I just always assumed that I would be going out.

It wasn't until the fall of 2011 when things began to change. I began to think seriously about it. It became clear the pilots were not going to negotiate a contract, the situation at the company was continuing to deteriorate, and then, we didn't have people running for President that had a whole lot of experience. And as you know, in this job it is all about relationships. Who you know. In Washington. With other unions. So I had been around for a long time. I had a lot of relationships with people. I just thought those would be helpful.

I just determined that I couldn't walk away.

So I decided to run, but I knew going in that I would not have a lot of time to dedicate to campaigning or running for re-election.

I knew it [bankruptcy] was going to be a horrible, horrible process. But after meeting with the people I met with that summer and fall, I knew that I could make a difference. Did I think all of this was going to include a merger? No. But did I think I could help lessen the blow of a bankruptcy? Yes.

PBB: So it sounds like you began to change your mind about running because of the task that was unfolding in front of you.

Laura: Well, yeah. I knew it was going to be very painful. I had certainly known enough people who had gone through it [bankruptcy], and certainly our restructuring in 2003 had left people really struggling for a very long time. I knew that a bankruptcy was going to make this situation even worse.

But what I was most afraid of was American's ability to survive at all.

I knew from everyone that the creditors committee in a bankruptcy had a lot of influence when it came to a restructuring plan. And I knew that American was in serious trouble. If the airline did go into bankruptcy, I wanted the story to be told that if we just throw a couple of bandaids on what was there, it wasn't going to be enough.

PBB: That was a very real possibility. There were vulture scenarios out there.

Laura: Yes. And I knew that. So I began to seek out people who had been there. I wanted to know what they had done. What they would have done differently.

PBB: You began trying to figure out the best way to navigate the inevitable.

Laura: Yes. I met with [ALPA President] Lee Moak, I met with AFA's President Greg Davidowitch from United. I met with a number of union presidents. I wanted to know what they did, and what they would do differently -- from those who had gone through bankruptcies. "How would you handle it, what would be your advice", that kind of thing. Across the board, I got the advice that a seat on the creditors committee was very important. No surprise that immediately after the filing, I began to lobby to make sure that APFA would have a seat on that committee

So, yes, as things at the company deteriorated, I felt I was in the best position to help us through all this.

PBB: So the decision to run again was the right one.

Laura: I am thrilled I did it now. [Ran again for President] But I admit, and I have not admitted this to other people until now, but I admit that at the time I said to myself -- if it all gets too much, or I feel I just can't make it -- nobody has a gun to my head. I can get us through this but I don't have to commit to anything permanently. All I can do is to do my best.

I also felt like if I lost, at least I could say to myself that I was willing to do it. And if I didn't run, then I couldn't have really criticized because I hadn't even tried to help.

So it was not like the first time I ran. That time I had a lot of passion. I really wanted to do it. But this time it was different.

PBB: It was not a passion. It had become an obligation.

Laura: I did think that. I thought back to people I knew who had done things. A friend's older brother, for example, served a couple of tours in Vietnam so his younger brothers would not have to go. I re-read Viktor Frankl's "Man's Search for Meaning" and in that book he talks about how if you think you have a responsibility to do something, you have an obligation to do so. It's not a choice.

So I re-read that book which I had read many years ago, and I just decided, this is something I think I need to do.

PBB: But it wasn't easy getting elected.

Laura: No, it wasn't. First, I had no time to campaign. I had to throw my name in the ring by Nov. 30. Remember that American declared bankruptcy on Nov. 29. On Dec. 6, I was pushing to get APFA a seat on the creditors committee.

That week after the filing, I don't think anybody believed that all three unions would get a seat at the table.

I have to say, I worked behind the scenes, and while I am not sure it had much effect, I did try to outreach and let everyone know that I was a reasonable person, that APFA deserved a seat at the table, that I did not want to get on the committee to vote no on everything....or to be an obstructionist. I had negotiated the best contract in 2001 and I have the dubious honor of having negotiated the worst contract in 2003 ...and well...I kind of get it.

For whatever reason, they put us on. And it was a small committee. All of that happened on Dec. 6.

Meanwhile, I had put together a slate of officers and the union elections were under way.

PBB: So then you also had to hire your bankruptcy "team." But APFA did something I don't think any other flight attendant union has done. You hired a financial advisory team as well.

Laura: That's right. First we had to hire our professionals.

So I was using our negotiations counsel for the bankruptcy, Rob Clayman. But then, because I was on the creditors committee, I got to see all the presentations by the financial advisers. It was a very intense interviewing process. I realized when looking at the resumes that these guys had all worked together, that they all lived in New York, they all had relationships with Wall Street, and I had relationships on Wall Street. Meanwhile, our attorneys were interviewing guys to work with us who were primarily "labor guys." They were all smart and they were all very good.

But I realized that what we needed to do was hire some "players." We needed people who have dinner with these guys [creditors], who had lunch with them. Who knew them. And as far as I know, no other flight attendant union had ever gone in this direction. But it was clear to me that this was what we had to do.

So at first I thought, well, we could hire the same advisers as the pilots -- Lazard. But the pilots are not that keen on doing things jointly, and the TWU at the time was not even sure they were going to even hire a financial adviser.

So I finally just decided we needed to go for it. So we hired the Jefferies Group. I was very impressed when they interviewed with the creditors committee. They had worked for many different groups, but had never worked for a labor union before.

And yes, it was incredibly expensive. I have to thank my board at this point, because I had to go to them and explain, "The good news is we're going to be a player. The bad news is that it is going to be incredibly expensive."

I explained that there was a good chance we would be able to get some if not all of the money reimbursed by the bankruptcy court, but that was not a given. But no question, this was something that had never been done before.

PBB: And they said?

Laura: They said yes. I have to say, the board was incredibly supportive. They really had to have a leap of faith to do this. And they did it.

PBB: Why did you know it was important to hire a group like this?

Laura: I saw their interactions in the presentations. As they did their presentations, and they talked about how important it was to be a part of what American would eventually look like, I realized that we needed to be a part of that process. And I knew I wasn't capable of it. I knew that APFA needed a lot of help in that area.

It was so worth every penny. I cannot even begin to tell you. Even though --as things worked out -- we did get reimbursed! My board was rather happy with that news.

PBB: This sounds like it was a great decision.

Laura: They [The Jefferies Group] did an outstanding job. We were able to talk about what was wrong at the airline, have meetings, have dinners, and then once the prospect of the merger became real --the relationship became even that more valuable.

PBB: Meanwhile, there was still an APFA election going on.

Laura: That's right. There were three people running and I lost in the first election but there were three of us, and one person was eliminated. So of course then I thought, "Oh no, now I'm not going to get elected." But I think by that time people were getting a little scared about what was going on with the bankruptcy.

PBB: So all of this happened even before you ever met with Scott Kirby in New York last March?

Laura: Yes. But as soon as I had the dinner with Scott, that was it. I told all the professionals that were working for us that we had to do whatever it took to make the merger happen.

PBB: Did you ever get any pushback from the board about what you, APA and the TWU ended up doing with US Airways -- the MOUs? This was something that had never been done before either.

Laura: Again, I have to say that I was incredibly lucky to work with the people that I do here at APFA, because, as you know, that whole process of going out to Phoenix and negotiating the MOUs -- that was all very scary. It had never been done before. But again, the people here at APFA were incredible.

I mean, as you know all too well, the communications part of this whole process was so incredibly important. Leslie [Mayo] for instance. She had to take all of this complex and very confusing stuff and put it into a format that flight attendants could understand. She speaks "flight attendant." First, you have to try and explain what is going on, but then you have to explain to them why what is going on will actually benefit them.

PBB: It is an incredible challenge. Actually, I thought both APFA and APA did an excellent job at keeping their members educated on what was going on.

Laura: I have to tell you I kept thinking, "How in the name of God will we communicate what is going on here?"

You know, it's very easy to say no, and not have a better idea. It's so much harder to put yourself out there and say, this has not been done before, but I think it can be done.

I kept telling everyone, "If we don't really believe this can happen, it's not going to get done. It's not enough to just want it to happen."

Again, I have to say the team we put together - Jefferies, our bankruptcy attorney Rob Clayman, the O'Neill group, everybody -- we all worked very well together. And I gotta tell you -- whenever you get a group of people together like this, there is always the potential for in-fighting or two groups pitting against one another. A lot of strong opinions with all of us. But it simply did not happen.

PBB: Would it be fair to say that after your dinner with Scott you were convinced the merger with US Airways was the best plan for American?

Laura: Yeah, I mean, I was. It just made such good sense. If I have any talent, and I don't have a lot of them, but if I have one, I think I have really good common sense. And I think it just "clicked." It was a fit. It made a lot of sense. This is going to be great for US Airways. It's going to be great for American. And it's going to be incredible for employees.

More importantly, it wasn't about management and not liking them. It was about a culture, and a direction that had to change for everyone's sake. It was never personal for me. It was just a matter of what was best for the company and the employees.

When you remove all the personal stuff and look at it objectively, there was no question. It had to happen.

PBB: I had pretty much the same reaction when I sat down with Scott and he went through the presentation with me last March. The presentation answered all my questions, and after that, I was convinced. I never had a doubt it was the best thing for American. The airline had no credible alternative. I can also say that this is pretty much what the reaction was from the Wall Street analyst community as well.

PBB: Shifting gears, you said before that your family had not wanted you to run again for President. What did they think about your decision to do so?

Laura: They were horrified. They said, "Don't do it." But they are very easy going, so I knew there wasn't going to be any great upset. But they were disappointed. And they didn't understand.

PBB: You said earlier that one of the reasons you didn't want to run again was because you wanted to spend more time with your son. What did he think about your decision?

Laura: Well, I told Tom, "Tom, you're going to be going away to college anyway.."

PBB: Another Tom?

Laura: Oh, my family is full of Toms. Tom Weir's father's name is Tom. My son's name is Tom. My brother's name is Tom. My father's name is Tom. And my father's mother's maiden name was Tomissino. So that is where they all came from...

PBB: But back to Tom, your son.

Laura: Yes, Tom, my son. You know, he told me, "Mom, my whole life I've been waiting to see what you enjoy. And see you enjoy your life". And I thought, "This is what I enjoy. Just because it's work doesn't mean you don't enjoy it."

So I told him, yes, I do enjoy it. I enjoy being an advocate.

PBB: When did you first figure this out?

Laura: I starting working for the Urban League back in my junior year in high school.

Accidentally. And I realized at the time -- I had a revelation about myself. I was an advocate.

I wouldn't be happy unless I was fighting for things. I can fight like a dog for an issue I believe in.

I don't know if I could be a hired gun to fight for things I didn't believe in, but if I believe in something, and my heart's in it, I'll never say die. I'll never give up. I'll never quit.

I feel very strongly about all of this -- APFA, labor, workers' rights. I mean, it's all about being treated fairly. And so as I said, I have to do it.

PBB: As another woman who enjoys what she does, works long hours, and looks at what she does as important, do you also get the "Why don't you take more time off?" questions. The "You work too hard" comments?

Laura: Oh, I get those comments all the time. But you know, I don't think I actually verbalized that this is what I enjoy until my son and I talked.

But I did stay close to home when my son was younger. In middle school particularly.

Because I believe if you lose your child then you never get them back. So in middle school I just flew -- with very limited union work. I did inflight turnarounds so I could be back in the evening and could be the helicopter Mom I had not been before, or after. <laugh>

And then in high school he became very independent and a really great kid.

Before he went to college, we went to dinner, and I said I felt so bad, that the last four or five years I had been in a daze, and there were things I had not been able to be there for. Tom played varsity tennis all four years, and I can count on one hand the number of times I got to see his matches because they were all in the middle of the week.

But you know, he told me, "Mom you were there. You walked the walk. You talked the talk. I wouldn't be the person I am if you were not the person you are. You taught me to be a better person."

PBB: Which begs the question of if you have a great relationship with your child, do you actually have to physically be there -- especially when they are in high school?

Laura: Right.

PBB: I think we all have those types of personal relationships that are incredibly strong, but sometimes we rarely see the person.

Laura: Right. And who needs those kinds of needy relationships where if you don't call them they get angry, or they get upset. "You don't have time for me. You didn't have time for me. You don't spend enough time with me." It's not that we don't care. We do. We just have things to do.

PBB: Which reminds me of the sign on your door.

Laura: I've always been an advocate. I always have some kind of cause. I was president of our landowner's council. I was like that in high school and college.

PBB: Were you on the debate team?

Laura: No, although I guess I should have been. Everyone told me I'm a great arguer. I think all of this really came together when I worked with the Urban League. I realized then that you can make a difference. People do need help. That they do need a voice. Everybody can't always just "pull themselves up from their bootstraps". Somebody always needs somebody else out there as their "agent" to get their story out. And I love doing that. I like doing that a lot.

PBB: We all need a mission.

Laura: Even Wall Street investment bankers! You know, a funny thing happened with the guys from the Jefferies Group. When we first hired them, you know, they were really stiff. You know, the starched shirts, the cufflinks. So they come down to Texas right, and Dan Akins would come in with the beer under his arm and ask, "Who wants a beer?" and they would say, "Oh no, we're working." Yeah, well, that eventually changed.

By the time this was all over, they told us that we became their favorite clients. Because they told us that they never get to be advocates. "We meet in suits in other offices with other attorneys, but we never get to fight for someone."

After they got into this and they learned the issues, they got it. They became passionate about it. It really became a thing where they became advocates for the flight attendants.

PBB: People know when someone truly gives a damn about something or not. Makes a difference.

Laura: Exactly. I had to give a presentation to the creditors committee, right? Everyone had to stand up and say why you were on the committee. Unfortunately, I was asked to go first. So of course, I am in meetings with the attorneys late the night before and they wanted me to talk about these statistics and all these numbers, and the next morning, I stood up and I just talked about flight attendants. These are the struggles we go through, this is how much we make, this is our life, we're still wearing the same uniforms since 1985, most of us commute. I just told them what our life was like and why we needed change.

I think they needed to hear about us. How we live.

But I also let them know that I was willing to listen to them, and that their financial recovery was important to us as well.

I let them know that the flight attendants wanted to be a part of the process

I'd never been on a creditors committee and I hope I'm never on one again -- but I have to say -- given what I have heard from other people -- this one seems to have been fairly civil in the way in which it did business. That's not to say there were not fights and disagreements. But at the end of the day, I think it was clear that both labor and the creditors were pretty much on the same page. And that is not the way it has been with other bankruptcies, I don't think.

PBB: What political office are you going to run for when all this is over?

Laura: Oh my gosh. I haven't decided what I'm going to do when my term is over. All I know is I am very glad I ran and I want to see this whole thing through.

PBB: I think there is a real need to highlight those labor leaders who are doing things differently -- rather than the old "us versus them" mentality.

Clearly you are one of those. That is also why I wrote about Lee Moak and what he did with the Delta Air Lines bankruptcy. Would you have any desire to do something else related to union activities within the industry?

Laura: Oh Holly, those days are so far behind us. That model has failed. Miserably. Actually it has been failing for a very long time. You see unions losing so many members. And you know, we have to work out a better way to do things. Not only with the companies, but with other labor unions as well.

I don't care that CEOs are going to always make more money than I do. But I do care that I am treated fairly. And with respect.

I do think labor unions have to start doing things very, very differently.

We have to be a positive thing for our members.

Labor unions have to start thinking about what services they can provide to their members, rather than how many members they can get. How can we help our members -- whether it is retirement benefits -- whatever they need help with.

This "we're fighting management for you" stuff doesn't work anymore.

PBB: When I interviewed Lee Moak, I remember he talked about how he looked at his discussions with Delta Air Lines CEO Richard Anderson as a "collaborative" effort. Yet he also admitted how difficult it was to change the "us versus them" mentality with his union members.

Laura: I used to say, and it wasn't that long ago, "I don't work for the company. I work for you." I would never say that again. Of course I work for the company. The success of this company is every bit my responsibility as much as it is the CEO's. And I have to make sure the company has what it needs to be successful, and that the employees are being treated fairly. I'm not sure how to fix it. [the state of labor unions] But there has to be a better way to do all of this. The first thing you have to do is forget about protecting your own personal interests. And that is difficult. Very difficult.

But I'll tell you one thing. I am so excited for the employees at American. They are so hopeful. They want to love their company again. I think the new management team cares about employees. They always take the time to talk about employees when they speak publicly, no matter who they're talking to. They take time to recognize them personally. They know who they are! I am very excited about that. And I know that if we all continue to commit to making this a smooth transition, this merger cannot fail. It just won't.

PBB: One last important question. The flight attendants at US Airways are represented by the Association of Flight Attendants/CWA. The assumption is that there will be a representational election. Can you comment on this?

Laura: Yes, I can. We are going to do everything we can to make sure there is not a representational election. That there is not any type of turmoil, upset, or conflict. We all want this thing to work and we can only do this if we all work together.

I am working with AFA now and the CWA to find some way to do this.

APFA is not going to go away, we're a very big union, but what type of relationship we will have with AFA or CWA, formally or informally, is yet to be determined.

Naturally, the boards will be involved in all of this, but I personally will do anything and everything I can to make sure we represent all the flight attendants. But I really don't think anyone wants a fight over this.

PBB: Thank you.

Laura: Thank you! That was fun!

PBB: Maybe we can do it again -- after the deal closes. Then you can tell me all those great stories you told me today on the record.

Laura: Yes. But only after the deal closes!