

**Diana Valenta discusses her career as a production worker
and UAW member at the Fisher Body plant in Lansing, MI**

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5 Jerri Smith: And this is Jerri, Jerri Smith, uh, Fisher Body Historical Team. It's
6 11/3/05. The time is 8:32, and we're doing an interview in the conference
7 room in Fisher Body Skill Center. And today we're going to interview
8 Diana Valenta. We're gonna go around the room and introduce each other.
9
10 Doreen Howard: Doreen Howard.
11
12 Cheryl McQuaid: Cheryl McQuaid.
13
14 Marilyn Coulter: Marilyn Coulter.
15
16 John Fedewa: John Fedewa.
17
18 Jerri Smith: [0:37] And Diana, would you state your name?
19
20 Diana Valenta: Diana Valenta.
21
22 Jerri Smith: [0:40] Your address.
23
24 Diana Valenta: 542 South Dexter Drive, Lansing, Michigan 48910.
25
26 Jerri Smith: [0:46] And your seniority date?
27
28 Diana Valenta: Fisher Body is, uh, '83. [Corporate Times 0:55] '81.
29
30 Jerri Smith: Okay. [0:57] And what department did you first hire in to?
31
32 Diana Valenta: C Trim. It's, uh, yeah, C Trim. Second shift.
33
34 Jerri Smith: [1:04] Do you know what job you had?
35
36 Diana Valenta: Yes I do. I had started out as, uh, anyway, I was on station wagons.
37
38 Jerri Smith: [1:19] Any particular job?
39
40 Diana Valenta: Yeah, I had to, oh yeah, I had to put the racks, build the racks up, put'm up
41 on top a the car. Had to crawl inside the car and do a couple wires and
42 crawl in the back of the tailgate and put some stuff up on it, in it, and then
43 I had to turn around and get back up on the car and screw down the, the
44 luggage rack things.
45
46 Jerri Smith: [1:38] And how long have you been on night shift?
47

1Diana Valenta: Most of the time I've been here.
2
3Jerri Smith: [1:40] Okay. Do you prefer night shift?
4
5Diana Valenta: Yes, I do.
6
7Jerri Smith: [1:46] Any other jobs that you've had in the years you've been here?
8
9Diana Valenta: Yes, I, besides that one, I used to do vinyl tops, and I did relief for that
10 plus I was a utility, and, um, put them on. Ya had to cut'm out, make sure
11 you cut'm just right.
12
13 [coughing]
14
15Diana Valenta: And, um, I did, uh, glass, [inaudible 2:10] glass. I worked up in Paint for a
16 while, and I did [inaudible 2:16] line. Did [mizaline] up there, which is a
17 place where it's air conditioned and it's clean and do mostly sanding and
18 stuff of up there, it's easy jobs. And I was in the Body Shop and I cannot
19 tell you the jobs, I can't remember it, but it was an awful job. And then I've
20 also been in the Skill Center, these last two years.
21
22Jerri Smith: Doreen?
23
24Doreen Howard: [2:38] Um, you've talked about two different seniority dates. Can you
25 explain why you have two different seniority dates?
26
27Diana Valenta: Yes. I hired in to Oldsmobile, and I worked over there for not quite a year.
28 And then we got laid off due to a cutback. And I was out of work for like
29 17 months. And then Fisher Body happened to call me because they
30 needed people and asked me if I would like to come to work for them,
31 which I did. And then they wanted to know if I wanted to back to
32 Oldsmobile, and I told'm no way, I was stayin' here. So and that's how I
33 ended up with two seniority dates.
34
35Doreen Howard: [3:13] And that was Olds in Lansing?
36
37Diana Valenta: Yes.
38
39Doreen Howard: [3:16] Okay. I noticed on your sheet that it said you were born in Flint?
40
41Diana Valenta: Yes.
42
43Doreen Howard: [3:22] How did you happen to come to Lansing then?
44
45Diana Valenta: Well I'm not even from Flint; I was just born goin' through Flint in a car.
46

1Doreen Howard: Oh. Okay.
2
3 [laughter]
4
5Diana Valenta: My parents were just drivin' through, and I came two weeks early.
6 Actually I'm from Houghton Lake.
7
8Doreen Howard: [3:40] Okay. So when you came to Fisher Body, you had already worked
9 at another plant. What were your thoughts that very first day that you
10 came in to our plant, um, what were your thoughts about the plant in
11 comparison to where you came from?
12
13Diana Valenta: Well compared from Fisher Body to Olds at that time back in '83, I gotta
14 tell ya, I worked in Final Assembly over at Oldsmobile, which is very hard
15 work. And we had ta use big guns [inaudible 4:10] seatbelts and stuff we
16 had to do plus other stuff. When I first come to Fisher Body, my first
17 thought was people told me how hard they worked, and I said you don't
18 know how lucky you are that you ain't workin' as hard as they do over at
19 the Final Assembly over at Olds. But then that all changed when Olds took
20 over the whole things, then we were all workin' hard.
21
22Jerri Smith: [4:33] Jerri Smith. Uh, have you been in any strikes?
23
24Diana Valenta: Yes, I have. We had one strike that [inaudible 4:38] or two, I can't
25 remember. Anyway, I know one for a fact that we come down to and it
26 was only, it only lasted a day or so and then they, that was the end of it so
27 we didn't get paid for comin' down here and picketing.
28
29Jerri Smith: [4:53] Do you know, can you tell us what that strike was over?
30
31Diana Valenta: Had somethin' to do with the contract. I can't remember. That's been a few,
32 quite a few years ago.
33
34Jerri Smith: [5:04] And also why did you hire in to Fisher Body? Just because of the
35 layoff?
36
37Diana Valenta: 'Cause they called me.
38
39Jerri Smith: And you...
40
41Diana Valenta: Well I wanted to get in to Fisher Body anyway. They ca-, I interviewed at
42 Fisher Body back in the 60s, and so, but the place I worked at the time was
43 getting mad because they were losin' all their people to GM, so they
44 wouldn't let us go. They were tellin'm stuff so they wouldn't hire us.
45
46Jerri Smith: [5:23] Did you have other family members that worked here?

1
2Diana Valenta: Yes, my dad worked down in the Body Shop.
3
4Jerri Smith: [5:29] Did he retire from here?
5
6Diana Valenta: Yes, he did.
7
8Jerri Smith: [5:32] What year was that?
9
10Diana Valenta: I have no idea. It had to be probly in the 70s, early 70s.
11
12Jerri Smith: And also, um, seein' as how I've been friends with you for a while, I
13 remember back when they used to have dinners in the plant. You used to
14 do fundraisers for different people that had problems or different things
15 like that, and you used to be in charge of them. [5:59] About how many
16 dinners do, can you think of that you did and for what reasons did you do
17 a lot of'm?
18
19Diana Valenta: Well I don't know exactly how many I was involved it, but I know we did
20 one big dinner for Oklahoma bombing that time for Oklahoma. And Bruce
21 [McConnell 6:11] and I got together and did that one, organized it.
22 Everybody helped – don't get it wrong, we didn't do it by ourselves.
23 Everybody, all the employees pitched in and donated food and stuff so we
24 could have it. So this was not just a two-person deal. And then we did ice
25 cream socials like four or five times, and we took that money from the ice
26 cream socials we had out there and we split the money and we gave half of
27 it like to the [Inaudible 6:35] School so to help them out with, uh,
28 playground equipment or whatever they needed, and we took half and we
29 usually give to, uh, to, uh, an organizations to help with gloves and hats
30 and stuff for the wintertime for the kids that needed it. And then we also
31 did one and we sent the money to Feed the Children, which is a big
32 organization that they take care of the hungry families here in the U.S.
33
34Jerri Smith: Doreen [inaudible 7:01].
35
36Doreen Howard: So it sounds like you were involved in quite a few, uh, community
37 projects...
38
39Diana Valenta: Right.
40
41Doreen Howard: ...and activities. [7:09] Was that all through your union activity?
42 [Inaudible].
43
44Diana Valenta: No, this was the stuff that we did on our own.
45
46Doreen Howard: This was all [inaudible 7:15].

1
2Diana Valenta: This is stuff that we decided to do on our own. And we did a couple more.
3 Now Connie Swander and I did a, one or two for a person that was, I think
4 in the Body Shop at that time or Skill Trades. I can't remember where they
5 were, but they had a problem in their family. Cancers and stuff, so we did
6 one to help them out. No but this was [inaudible 7:32], you know, I'm a
7 union person, but most of this was in the plant where we, uh, just took it
8 upon ourselves to have these to help our fellow workers out and their
9 families. But then I also always helped the union with, uh, the [gate 7:46]
10 collections for like the Old NewsBoy, uh, Toys for Tots, and I've done the
11 United Way 'cause I've done the community service committee for a
12 while.
13
14Jerri Smith: Jerri Smith, um, [8:00] what other committees were, have you been on in
15 the union?
16
17Diana Valenta: I've been on the election committee, and I'm on the recreation committee.
18
19Michael Fleming: Mike Fleming. [8:00] Tell us a little bit about the elections committee. I
20 think that was a special one for you, wasn't it?
21
22Diana Valenta: What do you mean by special?
23
24Michael Fleming: [8:19] Did you have a particular role [inaudible]?
25
26Diana Valenta: Well w-, I did, the, for, uh, I mean I was just a regular committee person
27 [inaudible 8:23] but then I was a chairperson for a while. And now I'm,
28 I'm still on the committee but just as a committee person.
29
30Michael Fleming: [8:32] A, a, as a chairperson, uh, what were some of your responsibilities?
31 How did that work for you as the elections committee?
32
33Diana Valenta: The elections committee worked pretty good for me. I had a really good
34 committee, and that helps. You're only as good as the committee you got
35 behind ya. I don't care who ya are, you're only as good as the people that
36 working with you. And I happen to be very lucky. I had a very good
37 committee behind me that helped me through every step if I needed it.
38 And my, some of my, uh, responsibilities was I had to make sure to get the
39 elections lined up, the dates, the times. Make sure the people got to sign
40 up. They had to get that posted and take the postings down and all that
41 stuff and get my committee organized to, uh, to run the election and make
42 sure that the ballots are ready and they all [inaudible 9:15] right and stuff
43 like that.
44
45Michael Fleming: [9:19] Basically it sounds your organization skills [inaudible] it was, it
46 was pretty, pretty much a challenge [inaudible 9:22].

1
2Diana Valenta: It was okay. I don't know why you call it challenging because I enjoyed it.
3 I, I really enjoyed it. So I guess it was a challenge too but I just enjoyed it
4 so, and I did feel good because I had people come up to me and, not to say
5 anything about anybody because I don't mean that, but they told me that I
6 put the respect back in the elections committee, which made me feel good.
7
8Michael Fleming: [9:42] You know, you, you sound like a very, very strong union
9 individual. I'd like to ask you how many General Motors vehicles or
10 American-made vehicles have you had?
11
12Diana Valenta: All my life, I drove nothing but GM except one time. I had one Ford
13 because I had to buy it used because I needed a vehicle right then and
14 there. And it was an old station wagon, which was okay...
15
16 [coughing]
17
18Diana Valenta: ...but my dad always instilled in us kids to buy GM vehicles, and we did.
19 And our kids do today too. And our grandkids. They st-, they buy'm too.
20
21Jerri Smith: Jerri Smith again. [10:18] What do ya, what are your reactions to the name
22 changes of Fisher Body when it's gone from Fishy Bod-, Fisher Body to
23 BOC to LCA?
24
25Diana Valenta: Well if you want my honest opinion, I don't like it. Never did like it. I
26 think it should stay Fisher Body. I know we have to go on and we have to
27 move on different things, but I still always felt, the people that I talk to
28 that always told me they always look for that on the cars, body by Fisher,
29 and that always made them feel confident in buying it. And once that
30 changed, a lotta people was very upset about it.
31
32Jerri Smith: [10:56] Do you, do you still refer to the plant as Fisher Body when you
33 speak to people or...?
34
35Diana Valenta: You know, I always say Fisher Body, and they know what I mean. If I say
36 BOC, they look at me, "What do you mean?" Fisher Body is it. It will be
37 till the day I die.
38
39Doreen Howard: [11:13] Doreen Howard. You came from Oldsmobile over here. Um,
40 could you, um, describe some of the things that make the people or our
41 facility different from Oldsmobile? What made us special compared to the
42 Olds?
43
44Diana Valenta: Well for one thing, I, like I said, I worked in Final Assembly over to
45 Oldsmobile, and, um, management over there was not very good. They
46 didn't treat the people right. I mean, I know we have that here now,

1 sometimes we did have, but when I first come to Fisher Body, I could not
2 believe how management was helpful, they worked with you. I mean, the
3 ones I had anyway. I don't know about anybody else's experience, but I
4 was very fortunate that the supervisors I had when I first come here was
5 excellent ta me. I mean, I had no problems any of'm. The only problem I
6 had, and it's a joke today, because Cookie and I are very good friends,
7 which is Eldridge Cook, and, uh, first time I ever laid eyes on this man, he
8 come up to me, he says, "What's hapnin' mama," and I says, "I ain't your
9 mama," and now we laugh about it. It's just a joke that's gone on all these
10 years because I wasn't used to somebody talkin' to me like that so.

11
12 You know, I was not from Lansing. I was from up north and, so we just
13 didn't have that kinda talk. And so it threw me off at first, but like I said,
14 Cookie and I we laugh about it every time we get together now. It's a joke
15 between us. And management just helped me out. I mean they just was
16 work with me and I had no problem. I mean, I had some supervisors that
17 people told me they didn't like, that they were terrible supervisors, but you
18 know what, I didn't have a problem with'm. I was straightforward with
19 them and they were with me. We respected each other. That's what counts.
20

21 Doug Rademacher: [12:58] Doug Rademacher. Would you share with us, did you notice a
22 difference in your union representation from the time you worked at the
23 Olds plant and when you came over to the Fisher Body plant? Did they
24 greet you at Fisher Body? Did you know who your union reps were? And
25 what was the environment as far as union representation?
26

27 Diana Valenta: Well, now you gotta remember, back in '81 was when I was at
28 Oldsmobile, and the union over there at that time was pretty good. They
29 actually were. I mean, I had a problem – see, I was a UAW member. I had
30 been a UAW member since back in the 60s. Every plant I've went to has
31 been UAW. Whether it was at GM or a different plant. I started out at
32 Gibson's in Greenville building refrigerators, that's UAW. So every plant I
33 went to has been UAW. So I've been there for 60 some-, since '63 in the
34 union. And but I went over there to Oldsmobile and as an example, if
35 you'd like one, they were pickin' on me over there. I had a supervisor who
36 for some reason didn't like me. I did my job. I did it for over two weeks,
37 not a problem. All of a sudden he yanks me off my job, puts me on this
38 other job that nobody, even the relief men, could not do. Took two people
39 to do it, and he told me I had to do it by myself. Of course, I didn't have
40 my 90 days in, so you know you can't go to the union till you get your 90
41 days in. And, but somebody got word to the union what was goin' on, and
42 the union did come up and take care of it.
43

44 So back then, the union was pretty decent, but it got worse as it went, as
45 far as I'm concerned, over there. Over here at Fisher Body, the union I've
46 got right now and the people that's in the union, I love'm to death. I think

1 they are the greatest people we've had 'cause there's been some probly
2 good ones too in the past but I didn't know them. And, um, as far as when
3 I first came here did the union come up and present themselves to me, no
4 they didn't. I had no idea who any of'm were until the committee man
5 finally came up and talked to me so I knew who that was. And he come up
6 and introduced himself. Course, I worked with his wife too, so [laughter]
7 that helped when he come over and introduced himself and let me know
8 who he was. And he ended up bein' our president for a while. And that
9 was Garry Bernath. And the union here so far, I mean, I've had no
10 complaints on our union. I'm union strong, and I always will be and our
11 union has stand behind their people.
12
13 Doug Rademacher: [15:20] Diane, you just shared a moment ago that...
14
15 **Jerri Smith:** Diana.
16
17 Doug Rademacher: [15:24] Diana, you just shared a moment ago that you've been UAW all
18 your life. You said Gibson's of Greenville, they closed that plant. You've,
19 uh, they just, um, they're still open and building? I thought the UAW was
20 [inaudible 15:42].
21
22 Diana Valenta: No, they're – Electrolux is what they are now. And they are closing, but
23 they haven't closed yet [throat clearing].
24
25 Doug Rademacher: [15:49] There's a UAW plant closing there. Lansing's closing the Fisher
26 Body. What's your feelings about what's going on and, and the closing of
27 the facilities and, around you that you've worked with all your life?
28
29 Diana Valenta: Well, in the first place, the reason the, the plant in the Greenville is getting
30 closed is because it's going to Mexico. So you don't really want my honest
31 opinion on that on tape, but I'm tired of NAFTA and CAFTA and all this
32 that's takin' all of our American jobs away from us and sendin' them
33 overseas. And my feelings for Fisher Body, I re-, I really did not want to
34 see it close, but I do understand that we do have to move on and we have
35 to keep up with times whether we like it or not. And I'm one a these
36 people that would rather keep it the way it was. But then they weren't
37 makin' money and they had to do somethin' different to, to get back into
38 the game. So I can understand it, just don't have ta like it.
39
40 Doug Rademacher: [16:45] What was your most enjoyable moment at Fisher Body? Could
41 you pick one that you remember where either you had an impact on the
42 situation that was rewarding to you or that something happened for or to
43 you that you, uh, remember and hold dear?
44
45 Diana Valenta: Well actually there's a couple I can think of. One is that's really always
46 stuck in my mind that I thought was wonderful. That's when everybody

1 came together for the Oklahoma bombing. I mean it wasn't just the
2 employee, I mean, s-, it was salary and hourly. I mean everybody came
3 together for that one, and I thought that was just great that they would all
4 work together to do that. 'Cause we all know that management and hourly
5 don't always work so good together. And, but they did for that. They all
6 come together. I mean they, management made sure I got off the line so I
7 could handle it. And they stood behind the whole thing on it for us, all of
8 them. That will always stick in my mind as a memorable time that – and I
9 enjoyed it and it made an impact on me how people will get together, stay
10 together, to help somebody. And which Lansing, especially Fisher Body, I
11 can't, I don't know about Olds so much anymore because it's been years,
12 but Fisher Body has always been a group of people that always, when
13 something happens, they get together, they stand together, and they help
14 people. And it's like a big family. It's not one person or that person, it's
15 everybody.

16
17 And part of the second thing I remember, I won't go into details about it,
18 but my fellow employees one time, I did not know it, I was not prepared
19 for it, and somehow they found out when my birthday was. They put on
20 one heck of a party for me. And I was in total shock over it that everybody
21 that put in on it and how big of a party it was. But I won't describe the
22 birthday cake 'cause that was embarrassing. But it, it's funny, I never
23 forget it.

24
25Michael Fleming: Mike Fleming. [Inaudible 18:40] you're talkin' about that particular party,
26 this, that goes to the culture of Fisher Body. You said how everybody
27 helped each other. You were in Trim as I recall.

28
29Diana Valenta: Right.

30
31Michael Fleming: [18:53] Fisher Body has this, uh, uh, thing where if you come in and
32 you're new in the department, they don't let you fail. Have you noticed
33 that at all when you start to work on a job, you don't have the job, you may
34 not be able to catch up [inaudible 19:04] or whatever it is. What, what,
35 talk about those times on the line.

36
37Diana Valenta: Okay. As far as that, you know, I mean, as you know, everybody probly
38 knows that if you're gonna lose your job, especially to a higher person
39 that's bumpin' ya, I mean, it does upset ya. But, uh, they still stay right
40 there and help that person, train that person so they know how to do that
41 job to the best of their ability. And, and I've had people take me out, and
42 I've always worked with them. I ma-, I've even said, "You know, don't tell
43 them how to do their job but suggest," which is a nice way of doin' it.
44 Could I suggest to you the way I do it that might help you. And I've had a
45 lotta people thank me for that. So, and that's happened to everybody and,
46 that I've worked around that always work with the other person to help'm.

1
2 Michael Fleming: [19:47] Not just so much the bumping, uh, just when you come in to a new
3 department and that you don't have the job and it doesn't look like you're
4 ever gonna catch up, uh, the co-workers seem to all pitch in in front and
5 behind to, to make sure you don't fall behind. Did, did you experience that
6 [inaudible 20:02]?
7
8 Diana Valenta: Oh yes. I've experienced that more than once that they're always there,
9 they're always helping to help ya get back up the line or, if there's a part
10 they can put in for ya that you don't quite understand yet, they'll show you
11 the best way to put it in. They're always there to help ya.
12
13 Doreen Howard: [20:19] Doreen Howard. You have a nickname that was given to you. I'd
14 like to know what is your nickname and how did you get that nickname?
15
16 Diana Valenta: Well my nickname's Ma, which is very simple. Ma. I don't know how, or I
17 was, it started out with two guys out in Trim. And, uh, I was, uh, walkin'
18 in from lunch one night, and this guy was walkin' with me talkin' ta me.
19 And these other two guys, I had worked with'm. And for some reason,
20 they just started in, "Hey, you better watch how you talk to her, she's our
21 Mom." And that's what started it. And then just more people got into it
22 more. So I'm just known as Ma. Now I got, the only thing I got to say
23 about that is if all, if I was a mother to all these kids, I wish they'd support
24 me so I could retire.
25
26 [laughter]
27
28 Jerri Smith: Okay. Jerri Smith [21:09]. Um, were there ever any pranks pulled on you
29 as a new hire and have you ever pulled pranks on people while you've
30 been working here?
31
32 Diana Valenta: Well there's always been pranks pulled, I think, on different people. And,
33 um, do I pull'm on people, I don't know why you'd even ask me that. You
34 know I wouldn't do that. Well, maybe I would.
35
36 [laughter]
37
38 Diana Valenta: But, you know, it's just in the, like the game of playin' with people and
39 workin' with people, it's just like a family, like I said, and we just had, we
40 had fun together plus do our jobs.
41
42 Jerri Smith: [21:43] So you have pulled pranks on people. Would you like to elaborate
43 and tell us some of them?
44
45 Diana Valenta: Well about 'bout the one I just did recently with Jerri Smith? I sent her a
46 email [laughter] and it's about her driver's license. And she was thought,

1 she fell for it. Let me tell you people, she fell for it. All the way through,
2 she was fillin' it out, she got to the end, there's a monkey laughin' at her.
3
4 [laughter]
5
6Diana Valenta: You asked, Jerri, you got it.
7
8 [laughter]
9
10Jerri Smith: [22:13] Were there any other pranks you pulled on people in the plant?
11
12Diana Valenta: Oh sure. There's lots of'm, but I can't remember them all. I mean, it's been
13 so many years. You gotta remember, this was 20-somethin' years ago that
14 I've been here, so...
15
16Jerri Smith: [22:23] Were there any pulled on you when you first came to the plant?
17
18Diana Valenta: Oh yeah. Well when I first came, you know, they were pretty good to me
19 'cause they knew I was, I was new comin' in to this plant, and I was
20 actually a little shy. And I know most a you guys don't believe that, but I
21 was actually shy.
22
23 [laughter]
24
25Diana Valenta: And they took me under their wing and, and they...
26
27Jerri Smith: [22:40] Did they pull, the, the, the tur-, the free turkey for the new hires?
28
29Diana Valenta: No, they didn't pull that on me 'cause they knew I wasn't a turkey. Was
30 you?
31
32Jerri Smith: No. Are there any other questions anybody'd like to ask Diana?
33
34Doreen Howard: I'd like to say thank you very much for allowing us to interview you.
35
36Diana Valenta: Oh, you're so welcome.
37
38Michael Fleming: I'd like to thank you as well, Diana.
39
40Jerri Smith: Marilyn?
41
42Marilyn Coulter: [23:04] Um, now, what is it that you currently do now?
43
44Diana Valenta: I currently work in the Skill Center now.
45
46Marilyn Coulter: [23:10] What do you do in the Skill Center?

1
2Diana Valenta: I, uh...
3
4 [coughing]
5
6Diana Valenta: ...work on computers, and I help people that has to come in and, and
7 sign'm up for [TAB 23:18] and, uh, we have a library, well we did till we
8 started packin' it up, but we have a library where we rent, let'm take out
9 movies, take out books. Go back on the computers and if they have a
10 problem, we help'm on it.
11
12Marilyn Coulter: [23:33] That's considered a non-traditional job that you have?
13
14Diana Valenta: Yes. And I'm also known as Betty Crocker, by the way, by Marilyn.
15
16Marilyn Coulter: [23:40] And you're known as Betty Crocker because you do what?
17
18Diana Valenta: I do a lotta bakin', and I have backed a lotta stuff durin' the years that
19 everybody out on the line eat. I use'm as my guinea pigs, and they said
20 they love it.
21
22 [laughter]
23
24Marilyn Coulter: All right. Thank you.
25
26Diana Valenta: You're welcome.
27
28
29/kj