Judith McCullough
Interviewed by Ann Froines
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SEIU headquarters, Washington, D.C.

Judith, tell me the story about how you entered 9to5.

I was an office worker at an insurance company, Travelers Insurance Company in Boston. Also I was kind of part-time office worker and college student at the same time. I had read about 9to5 in the newspaper. There was a little article in the newspaper about doing some work in the insurance industry. So I called the organization to find out what was going on, and I was immediately invited to a banking and insurance meeting. [chuckles] You know, they made me get an assignment, and I got the assignment, I did it, and I started to get very involved in the organization.

Did you go to a recruitment lunch?

I did not. I actually talked to somebody on the telephone, and they just happened to be doing a meeting, and so just invited me to the meeting right away. So I guess the meeting was my recruitment. Although I did *hundreds* of recruitment lunches myself, [chuckles] but no, I missed that. That's too bad.

What motivated you to go to that first discussion? Do you remember? Were you wanting to get active? Were you angry about things that were going on in your job?

I think it was probably a combination of factors. Certainly my job was a frustrating job, and there were examples of...a man was hired as a clerical worker, and he was very quickly promoted. The supervisor said, well, he has a family to take care of. And there were lots of people—I didn't have family dependents to take care of, but I was taking care of myself--but there were lots of other women in the office who had children and families whom they were supporting. So, you know, somebody comes in with no experience but gets promoted very quickly. It was frustrating, and--

The classic situation where he got trained by--?

Right.

--a woman clerical worker and then got promoted over her.

Right. And the insurance industry is an industry where people can learn on the job and can move up the ladder. It's not like you go to college to learn to work in the insurance industry, there were many areas where people could've been promoted. There just wasn't really any opportunity to do that.

Then there were also very petty things like monitoring how long people spent in the

bathroom, and really rigid work rules. I once got sent home from work for wearing a pants suit, because the top and the bottom didn't match. This was the 1970s, and people had to wear dresses to work, and then they changed the policy, but the policy required that the top and the bottom match. So you know, that kind of stuff was frustrating.

I think that just the idea of an organization for office workers, that was what attracted me. It kind of fit me exactly at that moment. I don't think that I was really looking for an activist organization, but once I found it, I thought that it was exciting and fun and I really enjoyed meeting all the other office workers that were interested in doing something.

Had you had any experiences as an activist or in the women's movement? You mentioned you were a part-time college student, or you had been a full-time--I'm not sure.

I was a full-time college student and a part-time office worker, and I had quit college for a while and worked full time, and then gone back part time. I hadn't really been an activist. I'd been interested in the women's movement, and I sort of fit the description of someone who was slightly intimidated by it, and didn't see a place for myself until I found 9to5. I had done some civil rights and anti-war stuff, but just as a participant, really, not as an activist or a leader in any way.

Did you consider yourself a feminist, though?

I think that I did. I certainly identified with the idea that women should be able to have the same opportunities and do all the things that they wanted to do. I don't think I identified with kind of the...probably what I remember as sort of thinking that the National Organization for Women was...it just didn't seem to connect to me. Maybe it would've if I had figured out how to join it.

Yeah, that was one of the criticisms of the women's movement. It was hard to join it.

I hadn't seen anything or read anything that opened the door. And 9to5 opened the door around issues that affected my day-to-day life, so it was easy to walk in and become part of it.

Growing up, had you had any knowledge of workplace struggles or labor issues or unions?

Not really. Neither of my parents were in unions. My grandfather was in a union, but it wasn't really something that we knew a lot about. Both my parents were active in their communities and politically active—

In the sense of Democrat-Republican politically active?

Yeah. You know, I can remember, during the early civil rights activity, my mother being very supportive, more in a kind of...I think this actually came out of her religious background, just sort of believing that people should be treated fairly and equally. Also in her own life, having not had opportunities that she wanted all of us to have.

What was her background?

She grew up in Massachusetts in a large Catholic family. Her mother was actually a career woman. She worked for Filene's Department Store and was a buyer, and didn't get married til quite late—you know, at that time. Then, when she did get married, her husband was ill and died fairly young, and so she had to go back to work. It was difficult. My mother took on some responsibilities for some of the other kids, and she would have loved to have gone to college, but that wasn't possible. Throughout her whole life, she was always taking classes here and there. So she felt very strongly that women should be able to do what they wanted to do, and have an education, and...

And you got all of that growing up.

Yeah.

What were some of the first campaigns you were involved in at 9to5? Or maybe a better way to ask that is, <u>when</u> did you—you came on as paid staff fairly early, or no?

I was a member...I think I joined in 1974, and then I went on staff in the following year. And the first work that I did was around the insurance and bank—there were committees by industry, and so we did some work around insurance issues. I actually can't remember the exact sequence. So there was insurance work, and then there was also work around pregnancy being treated as a disability. I don't actually remember all my history on this, but I think that my first public-speaking role was around having pregnancy be treated as a disability. So I think it was before the—obviously this was before the—I think it was before the laws around people not getting fired for being pregnant or losing their job and that kind of stuff happened. I think that was connected with some of the policies of the banks and insurance companies, that we focused on that issue.

But we also did work around affirmative action and pay issues in the industry. In Massachusetts, we got the insurance commissioner to hold hearings about some of these issues. And used a lot of the federal...like affirmative action laws and...around companies that had government contracts, to try to pressure companies to make changes.

You were trying to do things sometimes that would capture press attention, too, right, like the ten worst bosses, or I forget exactly how that was organized.

Right. We did the boss contest, and we would target particular companies. We would celebrate National Secretaries' Week by talking about rights, respect, and roses, and did rallies, and would have gimmicks like a giant typewriter or ruler...those kinds of things,

to document the problems and to really show up some of the more outrageous things that happened to people.

Could you say something about those recruitment lunches that you said you did so many of? What their function was?

When I joined the staff of 9to5, we would get lots of calls from working women about issues and problems, and we would attempt to meet with people individually, so that we could talk face-to-face about issues and the organization. So our goal was to invite people to go to lunch, and this was just not our taking people to lunch, but just really to meet over lunchtime and to find out about where they worked and what their issues were, and try to involve that person in the organization. It was a very smart way to talk to people and collect information, but also to help people come into the organization. They have met somebody face-to-face, they can see that you look like them, and it encouraged people to come to activities, or help the organization within their own company, let people know what their rights were, and other kinds of things, even if they didn't come to an evening meeting, they could come to lunchtime things—that kind of thing.

What about in the formation of the Local 925 and the decision to become a union and do union organizing? You must have been involved in all those discussions.

I was involved in some of them. There were a number of people who talked about wanting a union in their workplace, early on. There really wasn't an obvious place to send people. I think that Karen kind of led a lot of the discussions with unions about what kinds of possibilities, or whether unions were interested in working with us. There'd been a connection with the Service Employees and a number of people helped the organization. So there were a lot of discussions with SEIU and eventually obviously SEIU helped us start the local. I wasn't involved in all the little negotiations, but I was on the staff at the time that it happened and there were meetings with some of the SEIU locals in Boston, and some of the international staff like Joe Buckley who helped SEIU think about that.

And also I remember...I don't know whether this was something that 9to5 sponsored, or whether it was a program that the...it was a community education and communications organization in Boston that I remember going to a class about what a union was and how you get one, and learned about the various things that unions had done, and how kind of the standard way that companies operate now was a lot due to the fact that people have organized unions. I *think* that was sponsored by this community education organization, which I can't remember the name of it.

Did you stay then with the organization 9to5 after the move to set up the local and the district 925 later?

Yes.

So you stayed with that organization.

Yeah.

I know that, because a sort of timeline has been put together to help me with these interviews, and Karen has mentioned things, that at some point, you went out to L.A., right, to organize out there?

Yeah.

Was that in relation to the film being made, the movie, or had you gone first?

No. I went out, I think, at the end of 1978 to Los Angeles. We had done a lot of different kinds of expansion. There were just various places where we had opportunities to expand, and Los Angeles was one of the places, in part because of connections. Bonnie Laden was in Los Angeles at the time, and she was part of SEIU, so there was that connection.

The movie was coming out right after that, but the organization had been there for a little bit. The organization had already started by the time I went out. It was an incredible experience to go 3,000 miles from home for a job. [laughs]

What was that transition like for you?

It was a wonderful experience. It was terrifying, but it was also a wonderful experience because you learn a tremendous amount when you are kind of plunged into a new situation, and in a way, from everything that you knew. It was incredible, and I had many opportunities to... work with other organizations, and was involved a teeny little bit in some of the movie wrap-up, like the L.A. organization got to participate in the filming of the opening credits for the movie, so all of our feet are in that scene. And we did a kind of fabulous Secretaries' Week event with Jane Fonda that two thousand people came to.

Was that in relation to opening the movie?

Yes, it was.

Do you remember any details about that?

Well, it wasn't the opening of the movie, but it was just before the movie was going to... It was actually the last day of filming for the movie. So the movie was coming out, I don't know, maybe it was coming out six months later. But Jane agreed to do an event for us, for Secretaries' Week. So we arranged to do it in this big hotel in downtown Los Angeles, and we had members speaking about issues, and then, of course, Jane was the attraction. We weren't necessarily expecting 2,000 people, but we had standing room-only; it was quite astonishing. It really helped us to build our membership and have a lot of publicity in the area, the downtown area of Los Angeles that we were working in. So it was quite fun. Jane Fonda came from the set dressed in her wig, and all that stuff. So it was great.

Were you involved in any of the sort of research for the film? Wasn't there some meetings of office workers where Jane was learning about the issues, and there were screenwriters or whatever?

Yeah. I didn't do a lot of that, but I know that they went around to a variety of chapters, to meet with office workers to hear stories, before they actually wrote the script, I think is how it worked. And they used a lot of the stories, you know, a lot of the examples that people talked about, in the movie, so it had a real connection to a lot of office workers.

Do you think that the movie was pretty significant, had a big impact on consciousness-raising? Do you remember talking about the movie in your own organizing?

I don't know whether... I think that it *did* have an impact. I think that it helped in a lot of ways to just interest people. But I think that, once you told people that the movie was about nine-to-five working women, and that we were involved in it, people thought that was great, and you know, it was kind of fun. But I'm not sure that somebody just going to the movie realized that. Some people, I think, thought that the movie came first, and then the organization came, that kind of thing. But I do think that it was great for people seeing office workers on the screen, and seeing people dealing with some issues that people deal with, even though most people aren't going to deal with them in quite the same way, but maybe would've wanted to kidnap their boss, but, you know...

Do you remember receiving trainings to be an organizer with 9to5, and later...I guess at [some] point you switched to the union? Working union? No. OK.

Not 'til I came to SEIU. But yes, actually there were lots of... 9to5, I think, was very good at training. When I first started as an organizer with 9to5, I went to the Midwest Academy in Chicago for two weeks, so it was kind of a basic learning a variety of things. And 9to5 did lots of trainings through the year on a whole range of things, from organizing and how to plan events and activities. We did a lot of support around supervising staff and that whole managing and financial stuff of the organization. And a lot of that was just done within the organization, or bringing in other people to talk about skills training. So there was that classroom stuff, but then there was a lot of mentoring work that was done by people helping you work through issues in your organization. And a lot of it had to be done by telephone because we were all so spread out around the country. So it was good. When we would do our annual summer schools, those were opportunities for sharing lots of experiences, and at some points also helping people deal with their social lives—or lack of social life [laughs].

Were those for staff primarily, or were they for employees?

The summer schools were primarily for members, and all the staff would go, too. But the ideal was to bring activist members from around the country to the summer schools, and there'd be workshops and speakers and fun things and all kinds of different activities, that

people got to share things throughout the country, but also I think that there were always larger issues besides just the office worker issues. There were always speakers who could talk about other kinds of struggles, that I think were very helpful for people not to just see...you know, just to have a bigger picture of the world.

What did you think about the national leadership of 9to5? Do you have any observations to make about those women who served as national leaders for quite a few years? Were they role models? Were they inspirational leaders? How do you think about what they meant?

Oh, I think they were definitely role models, definitely inspirational. Karen, in particular, was really someone who seemed to always be able to think big, and really was able to move the organization in a really exciting and positive way. She was always very inspirational. [chuckles] She would always speak at the summer schools, and those were very moving, and I think had a big impact on people, encouraging people to continue to be part of the organization.

I think that as a staff person, I think that the organization was very inclusive, and wanted people's ideas, and people were involved in decisions about direction. I thought that that was a very positive and probably an unusual—

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START of SIDE B of TAPE 1.

—Oh, absolutely. I think that one of the things that 9to5 was very, very good at was getting people to do things that they thought they would never, ever do—speaking in public, talking to the press, feeling like you're an expert on issues. I got to do all of those things. I'm quite sure I never thought I would do those things. [laughs] Because basically, I'm a very shy person. I think that when you are inspired and excited about an organization or an issue, it encourages you to take a chance, to take some risks. I think that 9to5 was able to do that over and over and over again with a lot of working women, and it was partly helping people to get to that step, and finding issues that people felt really committed and passionate about, and so they'd want to take that step. Also there was a lot of one-on-one work with members around particularly public activities, and a lot of work on thinking through the strategies to win campaigns or to make decisions about the organization. Although individual conversations with people, I think, really did help.

Besides the high point you described of the meeting of 2000 members when Jane Fonda spoke in L.A., are there other exhilarating moments you can remember from your organizing in L.A., some of the campaigns you were involved in there?

It's funny because...the wins were very hard to come by because there wasn't an election where you've got a vote count and you could make decisions. You knew one way or another, you'd won. A lot of the work that we did was around identifying companies that had bad policies, and working to try to change those things. And trying to get members to

do things internally as well as to do things through outside public pressure.

I think that there were some victories—they're sort of escaping me at the moment. We did a lot of work around equal employment issues. We did a lot of surveys and reports about the status of working women that...I'm not sure that we saw companies say, "Oh, yes, you're right. Of course. We'll change this policy." But we did eventually win some of those things.

I can remember doing work around people who worked in banks and insurance companies whose wages were so low that they actually got food stamps, and so that was a very educational...educating the public about how bad policies were in companies like that.

Do you think the aims of 9to5 were realized?

That's a hard question. I think that in some ways, yes, and in some ways, no. I think that the ability to win permanent changes really meant that people had to unionize, and we haven't seen that. So that's still a challenge out there, to figure out if that's possible, to organize the banks and insurance companies.

But I think that the work that 9to5 did and the role it played in educating people about working women issues was tremendous, and I think had a huge impact. I think there are a lot more things like family and medical leave, which is a long issue to win, and still hasn't been won, completely. You know, as kind of an example of something that I think 9to5 played a role in because of the type of women that were part of 9to5.

What are your years with 9to5? When did you stop working for 9to5, and start working for--was it right away you started working for SEIU?

Pretty much. I stopped in 1988, and that was partly...The reason that I stopped working for 9to5 at that point had a lot to do with resources. But for me, it was actually an opportunity to do something a little different. After a few months, I came to Washington to work for SEIU as an organizer, and that was an opportunity to use all the skills that I'd learned in 9to5, organizing...I actually ended up organizing healthcare workers. But it's all kind of the same skill set. That was exciting and fun, except it required way too much travel for me. [laughs]

Because you were part of a national jurisdiction?

I was part of a national team, and I was based here in Washington, but was working—I've worked in Massachusetts, which was fun because my family's there. I worked in Michigan, I worked in Maryland, worked in a lot of different places. You know, that's just sort of the nature of an organizer in SEIU, that you're expected to travel frequently. And then eventually, I moved from an organizing position to work with SEIU's associate member program.

An idea which in a way 9to5 had premiered, so to speak?

Right. Absolutely. So I did that for a while.

Can you just describe a little bit what that involved?

What we were attempting to do was recruit people who were leaving the union—you know, who were taking another job or leaving the union—to become associate members, and to stay connected to the union. We were also attempting to identify associations that fit within the jurisdiction to encourage them to become associations. So for example, we worked with LPN associations or social worker associations.

Do you mean, to get some of those folks to also become associate members?

Well, to become associated with SEIU, and particularly in healthcare, we would do a lot of joint trainings. In healthcare, we would do professional development trainings, and would invite our members as well as non-members, and try to encourage them to become associate members. You know, it's an opportunity for people to get to know one another, learn about the union. But also it was a way for us to think about having associate members help on issue work around either health and safety issues or legislative issues, or any kind of issue you can think about. That's one way to connect people to the union. We're still trying to do some of that.

Are you still in that position?

No.

Oh, you're doing something different? What are you doing now in SEIU?

Now my job is...I'm in the organizing program, and I'm primarily responsible for the field staff. Our field staff is represented by an independent union, and so I'm a kind of a liaison to that. And I work with all our field managers on hiring and making sure we enforce our contract evenly across the country. And, a lot of the administrative side of the program. Making sure money goes to the campaigns they're supposed to, that kind of thing.

To get back a little bit to the 925 legacy. What else is important in the legacy of 925? How would you assess it? In both aspects of it, both the organization you were involved in 9to5 and 925, the district union.

I don't know that the union would have come about without the excitement and involvement of the people in 9to5. I think that the ability of the association to involve people and activate people, I think, was of interest to people in SEIU. So I think that 9to5 played an incredible role in just being able to open people's eyes to a whole group of people who needed to be organized.

And also, too, a whole range of issues. I think that part of the great thing of 925 and the 9to5 is that the issues that got raised were really important issues for unions to be tackling. I think that it really helped SEIU as well as the working women out there, like family and medical leave or sexual harassment or of age discrimination. All of those things were important for the unions to take on and be able to help those women out with some of those things.

In your years with 9to5, was there anything about the work or the experience that was discouraging or disappointing to you? This is the question about the low moments, since I've asked questions about the high moments.

The low moments were all about money, [laughs] all about having to raise, having to worry about making sure people got paid and that kind of thing. That was the hardest thing for me.

Did you have to do fundraising?

Yeah. Yeah. And that's an issue for, I guess, every organization. But for me, that was always the major struggle. I think that we were always able to think creatively about the work. I can remember thinking, *Well, if we only had an 800 number.* Of course, now there is an 800 number. But there's lots of those kinds of things that were hard to do because resources were limited.

How did you make money? You, yourself, personally? What were the techniques you used?

We relied primarily on grants, and a lot of that work was done nationally, and then there was some local grant work that we did. And then our membership was some source of money. Then we did fundraising events. Sometimes we did raffles, sometimes we did auctions, sometimes we did events with famous people. In L.A., that was actually something we *could* do, which was fun but also somewhat exhausting, dealing with different people that...

A final question maybe: what did the experience of working for 9to5 mean in your life? Personally?

For me, I think it completely changed the direction of my life in a lot of ways. I never would've moved in Los Angeles, [laughs] I probably would never have lived in Washington. And certainly I wouldn't have had the opportunities to do the things that I've been able to do, if it hadn't been for 9to5. I don't know what I'd be doing—it's hard to even think about it. I *hope* I wouldn't still be at an insurance company, but you never know. It's hard to know. I feel like the experience taught me a tremendous amount. It gave me a lot of confidence in myself and in thinking that I can take some risks and do different kinds of things that I wasn't quite sure I could do. That in and of itself was an incredible gift, just to have that kind of an opportunity.

Because you were quite a young woman when you started with 9to5, right? How old were you?

Pretty young. I was...24.

That's pretty young.

Yeah.

It was kind of your whole adult life.

Yeah. Absolutely. Actually, moving to Los Angeles, I often think about that as, *Wow! How did I actually do that? Get in the car and drive away.* But that was a wonderful experience, and I often encourage people to do that kind of stuff, [laughs] because I think that it does really help you rely on yourself. For me at the time, that was a good thing, to learn that.

I realize there is one more question. Do you feel optimistic about the work you're doing now? And what keeps you going? You're not a traditional organizer now; you're more in a management position, right?

Uh huh. I *do* feel optimistic most of the time, and mainly because it is wonderful to see the new organizers that are coming into SEIU, the people who are in their twenties and taking on this incredibly hard job, learning and developing at a pace much, much faster than I ever did. I think the work is much harder now. So that's very inspiring, that there are still new people coming in, there are still people inspired to do this kind of work, and I think it's tremendous.

At this point in my life, I'm grateful to have a job where I don't travel a huge amount, and get to go home every night at a reasonable hour. But I'm also grateful I got that opportunity to do organizing when I was young enough to do it. Not that—we have lots of people who do it at my age, too, but...

I do wonder how some of them did it when they were raising kids at the same time. It wasn't easy, from what they've told me.

No, no. I think that must be the hardest...just the pulls on your emotions are really hard. Yeah, I think it's an amazing thing.

Do you feel that you had to sort of make that choice for a number of years, when you were doing full-time organizing, to sort of postpone the idea of including children in your life, or not?

I didn't really, because I didn't have a relationship to actually...you know, I wasn't involved with somebody steadily enough to have a family. And in the association it was much more possible. I worked in Boston, and then I worked in Los Angeles, but I really

wasn't someone who was traveling extensively. And there were evening meetings, but not where you have to be away from home a significant amount of time, which is often the case for organizers in SEIU, unless they work for a local union. Then it's a little more possible to keep that pace.

And so now you do a minimal amount of traveling. You do a lot of your work by email, I guess, and phone.

Yeah, most of my work is here in the office, and there are occasional meetings and conferences that I go to, but I don't generally go into the field.

Are you involved in training any of these new, young organizers, yourself?

Just in the administrative policies.

Making sure it all happens, probably, too.

Yeah.

What is your official title?

I'm the operations manager for organizing.

Is there anything at all you'd like to add about the legacy now? Sometimes talking about it makes you think of new things that you might not have remembered.

I just remember how exciting it all was, that it really was exciting, both as a member and then when I was on staff, that it was fun to go to work. It was challenging. It was just a remarkable experience. I wouldn't trade it for anything. It was great.

We're trying to capture that in this archives, too. Just what your lives were all like, as well as what you think about what it meant. It's great. OK. I think that's a good place to stop.

INTERVIEW ENDS