Linda Roberts
Interviewed by Ann Froines
Seattle, Washington
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I'm interviewing Linda Roberts, who works at the University of Washington in the department of facilities, on May 12, 2005. Ok, tell me Linda, what was the story about how you entered 925 at the very beginning.

When I first got hired at the university, I had a co-worker who had been involved in what was called the Classified Staff Association—it wasn't a union at the time. And through discussions with her, finding out about that organization, and we actually did have a--shortly after, I joined--we had a workplace—what would I say. Not really a grievance but something where it needed to be facilitated by that organization, and so I got to see first hand how that worked, so I joined.

About what year would this have been?

I think early 80s. I came to the U. as a permanent employee in '78, '79, so this would have been probably early 80s. That's in Intel, 19—I think '84, that I had a committee chair and got really involved in the leadership. So originally I was just a member, and then once we affiliated, then I got involved in the actual leadership as a committee person.

With the national union.

Yes, with the national, because we were just a campus organization before then.

And what did the--clerical workers--classified workers—

Classified Staff Association.

What did the Classified Staff Association do?

Our perception is it was very much like professional staff association is now. That it was dealing with all kinds of working conditions, and even salaries to the extent of being proactive with the administration, asking for a salary survey. Basically they were involved with everything but were not officially a union.

What made you go to that first discussion, that first meeting. Was there some problem in your work situation?

That's when I actually got to see it at work, but I'd always been sympathetic—as an employee I think whatever can help employees! (laughs) It seemed to me the right way to go.

Had you had any earlier experiences as an activist or an organizer in other settings?

I can't say really in terms of being in any kind of leadership. But involved in causes that I believed in, yes. But not really in any kind of structured way.

What were some of the causes?

Attending demonstrations in the 60s, things like that, but not involved in leadership. But I had been involved in campaigning for candidates, local candidates, candidates for mayor; we had people in our neighborhood who were very politically active, and I got involved in that kind of activity early on.

And what kind of demonstrations?

Antiwar, that kind of thing. Oh, sure, that kind of thing in the 60s, just attending.

Did you grow up in the Seattle area?

Yes.

What was your first job at the university?

I worked temporary jobs. And I worked actually a few years—it was what I wanted at the time, because it gave me time to travel. So I was working as a temp. And there's an office at the U. that will place temporary employees—you register with them, they'll send you out on jobs; so that's what I first did for actually a couple of years. And then if I needed to take time off, I could. Some jobs were maybe one or two days, and some jobs were six months or more. So it just depended. But that way, I got my foot in the door, and I got to know a lot about how varied the university is, in terms of its offices, policies and procedures, the quality of its supervisors, everything. I really did get around the university. And I'd been a student here. I have two BA degrees from here. So I'd been a student for five years. Never really had an inkling about what went on behind the scenes. The first time I really went into an office was when I went in and took my transcript, and you gotta go see the dean, and I had enough to graduate with two degrees, and I'm like—I never really even dealt with a counselor, I have to say, in my time as a student. And now working at facilities, I'm so aware of the infrastructure of the university. Both the offices—and just the fact that we have 7 and ½ miles of tunnels underneath, we have people that are doing steam lines—all of that that I never appreciated as a student, I've become intimately acquainted with. So working as a temp gave me an appreciation of all the different work places at the U. Because it really is a collection of very different workplaces.

Right. I worked for years in a university. I know what you mean. Even though it was a much smaller place. They're unique that way, that things don't relate to each other all that much.

Can you describe any of your own experiences as an office worker in those early days? Did you experience or observe a lack of respect to or for office workers?

One think I'll never forget is working at I believe it was one of the offices that dealt with Continuing Ed, or some kind of training—I don't remember what the office was called then; it is now probably part of University Extension. But the women I worked with there were doing things like putting together notebooks for trainings—they'd worked there hourly for several years, and they'd be terminated on a Friday and hired back on a Monday in order to make sure that they didn't need to be hired full time. I remember sitting there just chatting with them and finding out that they were hourly, and in order to be hourly, that this was what happened. That was just taken as a matter of course! It's kind of appalling! (laughs) But that was one example. Then there were other office where I was in where I felt like it was a very professional operation through and through. That people from the top down were respectful, and had their employees' best interest at heart, were pleasant to work with. So it was really a mixed bag. But legally those kind of things could go on. And there are still of course issues around temporary employment, even now—it's just not that bad. That cannot happen any more.

How did you feel about the women's movement in those years. Had that been something that had been part of your life or thinking?

Yes, but probably at that time, I'd have to say more because I was reading maybe Mary Wollstonecraft. It came from an academic perspective, not from being out in the workplace, not from being in the trenches. I was pretty young. And at the time, and still to this day, when I think of powerful women, I really do look at the women who won the vote. I look at the women in the 20s, whether in Britain or here, and having read some of their stories, it was where my first consciousness came. And I still look back to that as wow—you know, they were really the pioneers. So in terms of the women's movement in the 60s, of course I read Betty Friedan, etc. but...

Really, the 70s...

Yes. And I didn't really plug into that movement as a participant, really. I just never understood why there had to be a term like "feminist." It's like, ok, if you're a woman, why would you not be pro-woman. Why would you not be for equal rights. I just never understood it. So, yeah, sympathetic totally, but. (laughs)

You didn't particularly call yourself a feminist?

Oh, absolutely I did! I thought, why would you have—but I never understood why do I have to call myself anything. That was one of those issues that was just like—am I—you know. I had seen a progression for women, and like I said, when women got the suffragette movement, women got the vote, etc., the kind of regression of the 50s never made sense to me, and maybe America's just on a different trajectory than Europe, or something—I don't know how to explain it, even to this day! (laughs)

Did you have any knowledge or experience with union struggles growing up, in your family?

I kind of have a bizarre family. My Dad was an attorney, and worked for corporations. He was a labor specialist, and would negotiate contracts for corporations. But absolutely a Democrat, sympathetic to labor, wanting I guess that balance? Working, his life, his career was effecting that balance. Absolutely. And so I grew up with those values.

And your mother—was she working when you were growing up?

Not when I was growing up. She worked earlier on, yes, but not when I was growing up.

Describe in some detail one of the campaigns or struggles you were involved in here in Local 925. Then it was District 925.

Right. The campaign to get a union shop, the first campaign, was a particularly—there was a lot of antagonism there, it was tough.

A lot of hard feeling between employees?

Right. And we lost that campaign. We didn't win that one. And I remember being kind of in the front line, in a sense, trying to conduct meetings, and trying to have a discussion. But there were a lot of bad feelings, because there were certainly at that time a lot of people who worked there that were not sympathetic to a union and were not in any way shape or form ready for a union shop. And we had had an open shop for a long time, and it wasn't until a few years later that we actually achieved our union shop. So the early one was a struggle and there was a lot of animosity.

Did you have a position in the union at that time?

I'm trying to think back. I think I was chair of one of the membership committees. And there were several. Like there was an upper campus, off campus—and I think that's why I was attending the informational meetings, and that's why I remember particularly that that campaign was not really successful, but we learned a lot.

Do you remember some of the things that you did learn out of that campaign?

I think basically, learning how to assess whether you're ready to have that vote yet. That would be number one. We were hoping, but it didn't happen.

Who ran that campaign? Was it being directed by 925? Or was it more local leadership?

I think it was a combination. It was kind of a thing where you test the waters, take polls, try to assess where we're at; we were thinking we were there—we weren't. And I wasn't really involved in the leadership to the extent that I was later on.

Tell me a little bit about your role being involved in leadership later on.

I was a steward later on, and that was a very rewarding, I thought, position. I learned an awful lot from that. And then I became a trustee—my first board position was as a trustee. Then later, I think treasurer, and then I was on the executive board. So that was my trajectory.

What did you do as treasurer?

Treasurer is just basically—the requirements of the job are pretty much complying with the legal requirements: reporting, etc. And then reporting to the membership each year about the budget. Being at meeting at—I'm not sure if it was the annual meeting or if we had a special meeting to discuss the budget. Basically, reporting to the membership at large about—

How money was spent.

Right. How money was spent; and being part of the executive committee to look at the last year's budget, decide what decisions need to be made about next year's budget; preparing an overview for the membership; presenting it to the membership.

You said earlier that you became more active later on. By that did you mean, taking these responsibilities to make the union run.

Right. I had gone actually—I was a committee chair and then had been a steward. But it wasn't until I really became a trustee that I began sitting in on the executive board meetings, which was a whole other level of involvement.

Is that where they did some of their strategic planning for the future of the union, like what campaigns to take up?

Yes. Absolutely. Right.

Do you remember some of those discussions or debates?

Oh, gosh. (laughs) It's really hard because we're talking about so many years of so many meetings that it's hard to break it down.

You were an officer many—

Many years. Right.

Can you actually remember how many years it would have been?

From '84 until I left the union, I was involved in the union. But actually being on the executive board, probably more like—I'm trying to remember. So there were a number of years when I was on committees. But not really on the executive board.

So it would have been almost a decade or so that you were involved?

Oh, sure. At least.

Were there campaigns that really took a lot of your time and energy, such as political activity down in Olympia and that kind of thing?

Absolutely. Went to Olympia also on negotiating teams. That was quite an interesting experience, because sitting across the table from management is extremely enlightening. I remember that very well; I was on several of those. And going to Olympia when we did our Lobby Days, and writing to our representatives, getting appointments with them, going down—it was great. And also trying to bring members along too. I remember trying to get people to go have that experience with us—we'd provide transportation. And it was always interesting because anyone who did that, came away, and it was a great [ ]—that was wonderful. The union provided that, that made that happened, that people who wanted to could go down, meet with their representatives, learn what the issues are, and take a stand. I remember only once, I think, testifying before a committee, but that again was a very interesting educational experience. And that was again facilitated by the union.

Was it ever an issue for you—speaking for public and that kind of thing?

There were lots of trainings, and I think probably the time when I became treasurer, and was starting to have to speak, that I think being involved and working on that—working on presenting a budget; learning how to present it; did a tremendous amount for my confidence speaking before groups. I would have to say that it is the union more than any other group that I've been involved with, that has really helped me grow. Because there were expectations there. I still think that had I not been involved in the union, I don't think I'd have the self-confidence (laughs) that I do today. I mean, there's nothing like facing hostile crowds of people [laughing] trying to sell something, to give you confidence.

That's true. I've noticed in a couple of these interviews, there's a certain paradox, because women have been talking about developing all this knowledge and skills and self-confidence, and then of course they apply that sometimes in their career situation and then they up in a professional staff position, and they're outside of the union.

Exactly. Well, I don't mean hostile crowds for the budget, mind you. I'm talking about the union shop. But it's true and I've heard that from other people too that have been involved in it. People who have been stewards, for example. Whereas they might have hesitated to approach somebody in authority, when they're actually representing

somebody else—and this is true for me—somehow you're there as an advocate, and that really spurs you on, because it's not like you're coming to present something that you want, or you're timid—who am I. But when you're representing somebody else! Suddenly you will find your voice. I feel that speaking for other people has been one of the most rewarding things that I've done in the union. There's just nothing like that. I appreciate being given the opportunity to do that. And I have to say that, given the employer, they're not always successful. Grievances—they're not successful actions most of the time. Often, because by the time they get to where a person needs representation, chances are that they're not. There have been successes but there have been a lot of failures. But across the board, the people that I have been there helping, have been so grateful for the union assistance. And I'm like, [my God], you're not getting what you want, you're not—you know. But the idea of having an advocate and not being there alone is so incredibly important.

In fact, it actually colors my opinion of almost any activity now. I got an email from the UW Women's Center about doulas. And a doula is a labor partner for a woman. Not a nurse, not a midwife. Somebody there. And I'm hearing about this kind of phenomenon where women are having those, and maybe in the past it would have seemed like, what do you need. But I know darn well that just having—for no other reason than to somebody there, in a role that is strictly for you, holding your hand, whether—who knows what'll happen with the outcome of a birth. Who knows what'll happen with the outcome of a grievance. And your husband is probably just not going to be all there. Right? And so just that role—the role of hand-holder, for lack of a more sophisticated term, is important.

Now steward of course has many other connotations and I don't want to diminish that. But for me, just that aspect of it alone is worth having been involved.

Interesting. When you got involved more deeply in 925 and learned more about unions, did you observe anything special about 925's approach to organizing? [Because] of being involved, did you draw any conclusions about that?

I wasn't involved in any trade unions or any of the traditional unions. I certainly read a lot about them. And I love labor history. There's that mystique, there's that wonderful tradition of labor history that is not taught, unfortunately, that I really appreciated. So I kind of had my idea of what unions were, and then this, but I can only say that I think we've had some wonderful successes, and I like our approach as a consensus-building approach, but we've also had some failures. So I can't say that we've been always successful. I think the goal of most of us was to have a consensus-building approach, and to make organizing a fun and social activity, to build friendships and build liaisons with the community, and all of those wonderful networking things. But we've also had, as you probably know, we've had times when we've had rifts in our union. But my view--

Nobody talks much about that.

Oh. (laughs) My view of the goals and what I put my energy into were extremely positive. And I feel like it works most of the time and it's a goal worth striving for; it's not going to work 100% of the time, but nothing does.

What more can you say about 925's leadership, and how you responded to it as a union member, union activist; and also say something about when you began to perceive yourself as a leader. There's this whole interesting topic of women's leadership.

Exactly. My perception was that there wasn't any formula. We had goals, but there wasn't any "You will say this this this this." I felt like I had freedom to be a workplace leader, understand what different people's perceptions were, and where they were; tailor my message to those people. And I felt that that was a very positive thing. And I knew that you're not going to get 100% of them. But I remember—and maybe two years after first talking to someone—getting someone to sign a card; or when somebody did finally perceive the value of a union; people would come in at their own pace. But people could be very easily spooked away by a heavy-handed approach. So I really didn't do that. But I made it clear that—and I would answer people's questions. And if I thought they weren't right I would absolutely tell them, "This is the way I think it is. You're seeing this but I think if you found out more about our union, you'll see this this this." I wouldn't just say, "Well, apparently we disagree." I'd always leave it open that, you know, "I have a different opinion. Do you want to know more?" And I'd always leave those doors open. So I liked our approach. That was very positive because women hadn't been unionized. They don't come out of a labor tradition that I love to read about and hear about—the coal miners, the steel—this is a very different environment, and it's a new thing. So just try to put a positive face on that.

What were some of the common fears about joining unions that you encountered among women?

I had some bizarre ones. I'll never forget: somebody came up to me one time, and I had talked to her about joining a union, and she said, "Union people are so scruffy." I'm like, ok, well I don't even know where to go with that one. Things like that. Or just kind of an odd—the image of the unions is not people in an office.

Was fear part of the picture?

It might have been. I think also you have to, no matter what, whenever you're talking about money for anything, you have to let people know what is your money going for. The consumer image—"I am paying this—what am I getting"—and I said, "No, it's really a membership fee. It gives you a right to participate. And without it, you don't have a right to participate. It's like joining a club. It's not like paying for something to be given to you. It's not—and trying to get people to understand what participation and membership meant, as opposed to paying for somebody else to do something for me. That was kind of I think the main struggle, was getting that message through. Changing that perception. Most of the people that seemed to be very antagonistic, it was that "I

don't want to give my money. Because I don't think I need it." So changing the consciousness from—we're all together in this, it means we all participate, and it gives us greater power. But you have to connect the dots. How does it give us greater power. And for people who had never even that on their radar, it was difficult. And it probably still is for certain people. There will still be varying degrees of openness toward that concept.

One-day strike that happened recently—were you still in the union then?

Yes.

And you already changed your job?

Yes, I think that was a couple of years—yes, indeed.

What do you remember about that experience—did you try to bring out your people?

We did, and mostly I remember talking to the public, because we had positioned ourselves in various parts of the city. And I remember getting quite a lot of sympathy from the public that we encountered.

In various parts of the city, not just the campus?

Right. We did. It was an educational—the one I'm thinking was an educational kind of day. I was pleasantly surprised that there was understanding and sympathy for what we were talking about. That was great.

What were the issues—do you remember what the big issue [ ] was?

I think the issue was trying to get—I think it's always about money and respect, all the issues that the public—our educational task was to educate the public that first of all, we're not shutting down services, that while we're out on strike that there are people in the emergency rooms, that the nurses are there, etc. And just to try to enlist pressure on the legislature to deal with us in good faith. That was pretty much what we were asking.

What did you observe about the roles and experiences of men in 925, since it was primarily a female union and female leaders?

But the men that were leaders I thought did an outstanding job, and I can't say that I observed any difference in style or goals. I think the consensus-building goal was across-the-board men and women. I can't see any differences of style or goals that I observed, personally. And I think that the men that were there were doing similar jobs, were advocating for exactly the same rights and respect that the women were.

I wonder if any other locals in District 925 had a man president like Neal.

I don't know.

He told me he was somewhat reluctant to accept that role, because he thought in a primarily women's union, the leadership should be women. He did rise to the occasion because—

Absolutely. And as I said, his style was completely in sync with what—I could see a man coming in who might have a different idea of how to lead, if you will, that would not go over. But we've had women whose styles conflicted with ours, too. So really, I cannot say that it's gender-related, in my experience. It's more style and goals.

And understanding what the primary values of this union are.

Right. And there's no question—I would not have stayed involved at all if I had felt that the style conflicted with my values or needs.

How would you describe those values that you have, style, whatever word you use.

I think it's basically having something that people can benefit from. I was convinced that people in those jobs can benefit from the advocacy of a union. Certainly, the help of stewards; a contract. I was convinced of that, and having a group approach to the legislature—the university I didn't believe was going to advocate as strongly for staff as they went and might for faculty or something else—a building or something they wanted. I felt that this was something worth selling; I liked the way we were selling it—tremendous amount of information sharing: invitations to meetings, come hear first-hand —seemed to be basically, we have something that's valuable and give people the opportunity to take advantage of it; and we're always reassessing—where are we, what could we do better—I like that. That is the approach I really like.

Was 925 a family-friendly organization when you were active—did you have a family at that point—how did you combine all your meetings with family responsibilities?

Yes. My daughters, I remember, came and helped do mailings a few times. We had picnics and things like that. Later on, they provided child care for meetings; so that was always a goal, and part of—

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--things that we thought were important. And certainly representing—that's a primary consideration.

A couple of the people who've been organizers that I've interviewed have mentioned that they couldn't imagine having young children and being a field organizer.

I was not one. I have one chair and I sit in it. (laughs) Pretty much on-the-spot job.

What do you remember about how 925 dealt with issues of diversity, especially racial and ethnic diversity, both in the workplace and the union?

I don't know. I have kind of mixed feelings on that, to be perfectly honest. I have kind of mixed feelings. I think we were sensitive and maybe hyper-sensitive in some ways. And some people would say no. I just think that the university, I think—our employer is pretty much legally compelled. So when being proactive and trying to get people into the leadership that reflect the membership, is a great goal. But if people don't want to participate—I mean, it's not something for everybody. So, my feeling was we were always having to try to bring everybody in, in a greater capacity. I thought it was across the board. Just building up more involvement, period!

For everybody.

For everybody. Yes. Because it is—the one thing I would have to say is it does demand a lot of time. So yeah, I think the effort—maybe I was missing something, but it seemed to me the net was cast really wide, and that people were invited—it was very inclusive in general. But then I think it's the kind of thing where people will—like you say, there are family issues and there are other issues, and if you're going to commit a lot of time, I don't know if it's a question of trying to get leadership from various groups, as opposed to just get leadership that can possibly spend that much time. (laughs) But the goal of course would be to get a huge percentage of people involved in leadership. But as I sit back, I think, well, I'm involved in a church, I'm involved in a choir, I'm involved in a French conversation group, I'm involved in a book club. And I would say, I don't care what the organization is—you're not going to have— [ ] small number of people that are going to be coordinating or facilitating in a leadership role.

Were the aims of 925 realized, in your opinion?

That's huge! (laughs) That is huge, because the aims of 925 are probably the aims of organized labor, and organized labor is falling on hard times, and we're all looking to the leadership of people like Andy Stern.

At the University we started out as just an association, affiliated, became a union, became 925, restructured to become 925—I think the trajectory there is to try to maximize our effectiveness. Also, like I said, I liked the style—I think sometimes we may have been even hypercritical of ourselves, but basically I think all the ingredients for success are there.

Are there specific things you remember that the union leadership was hypercritical about?

No, I just think that we have great goals. And I think the reasons maybe that we're not succeeding have more to do with maybe things that are like the national labor laws.

--over which you have little say...

Absolutely. In terms of what we have control over at the local level. But the things that are happening nationally politically, the way that labor has been at a disadvantage trying to organize in all sectors, because there's no question—we'd be stronger if every sector of the work force were stronger and more organized. So those are the things that I think... What we were doing here, I feel very, very positive about every bit of my experience.

You were probably aware at some point that one of the goals of 925, originally, and then 925, was to organize in the private sector. Do you have opinions about...were those aims realized?

That we at some point got off of that as a goal? I remember wanting to do that, and we looked into maybe organizing people at some of the private colleges. But the childcare campaign I think was determined to be, at the time, the direction we wanted to go. So as far as I remember, I thought that was kind of the fork in the road there, that that would be the direction to go in. I don't know if there's any reason why we wouldn't be able to organize those workers at another date. I don't know. But at the time it seemed as if that was the trajectory we were going on. That government workers and the—Head Start—that that would be a better way to go for organizing. But I would have been willing to go to Seattle University or wherever. I think it's just to determine where do we put our energy. So that may still be a goal.

Was there anything you want to say about your experience working with 925?

I think just the general frustrations that anybody working in labor—in fact recently I had a talk with somebody who was involved in HR at the ["U"?] and about the only thing more difficult than being in HR would be working in the union! And it's true. I think so. It's just a frustrating thing, because things don't move as quickly as you'd like. And because it's difficult—the percentage of people organized, the salaries that can be paid to unions versus the salaries that can to be paid to corporations that are fighting unions. So you want more, you want it now (laughs), and it seems like there's so many forces working against organizing, but...

When you say HR, you mean Human Resources?

Human Resources, from the management perspective of things, yes. That's a frustrating job, and I think being involved in trying to negotiate for a union against those people is frustrating! (laughs)

Do you have any opinion about what impact 925, as you call it, 925—District 925, had on SEIU in particular, or organized labor—do you know much about the national [ ]?

As far as I know, I think it had a very positive impact. Because I think we provided a great model, as far as I can see. That would be my—in a nutshell.

A model of the way to organize, you mean.

Yes. Organizing was always very important for us, definitely. I think the communication network was great. In other words, I don't think we tended to take a lot for granted, and then we may not have been able to convince everybody, but I think we sure as heck tried to communicate with every member—I really do. That was just fantastic. And I think however frustrating—

It's probably unusual.

Right. And however frustrating, I think you have to communicate...wait a minute, you know, but hey—communicate, you know? Let everybody know and then deal with people's issues. We always had great newsletters; meetings; regular meetings; publicized meetings. We were always trying to get people more involved. The goal was always to get people to take on responsibilities, be stewards, but we'd also have what we called delegates in the workplace, that were people—not stewards, and not people officially involved, maybe, in an elected position. But that were the worksite information distributor. And having that network—just that alone, I think, is just a great model. Because you've got a whole other layer of people who are in the know. Or who make it their business to know and who will then be able to explain something. That's a great, great thing to have.

Do you think 925's *[tape glitch]*

You can't really say that! I don't know. Because as I said, I think a lot of the great leadership—men were involved; and there were also women that I think were not particularly on board with the model. So I can't really say that. I work with blue collar workers. I work with trades people. There may be just a slightly less militant kind of stance—there's a kind of—

Among them?

Among the trades because of the labor history of this country there's kind of that little bit more of a swagger, a little bit more of that—you gotta really get out there—I don't know.

But you were saying the less militant stance is your [union]?

Yes, I think. So we will be out marching, demonstrating, and being creative about how to call things to the attention of the press, maybe...yeah, just creative. I like that kind of... creative, like being sort of open to any suggestion that might work, however far-fetched. That was a fun part of being involved in it.

Absolutely! Things like that are just really fun. Yes.

Can you remember any?

I remember that we had one manager that put his hands on his employee and tried to—so we had this thing where we had the strangler. We had to basically get the attention of the press around this issue. Get the attention because the management was going to give this person a slap on the hand and minimize that, and we felt this was really outrageous. So that's one thing that I remember. And then I remember when there was a surveillance camera set up in one of the parking garages. And when it became known—it hadn't been negotiated, nobody had been told, none of the employees—we all got trenchcoats and glasses and went and we staged this kind of like we were spies, and definitely got attention about that issue, certainly.

What was the purpose of putting in cameras? Were they security cameras?

I think at that time it may have been to minimize theft or for security. But the thing was, whatever their explanation was, they had not consulted anybody. And that was really a change in working conditions.

What did the experience working as a union member and officer mean in your life—working so closely with 925?

Overall it was basically just trying to make things better for myself. But by doing that, it meant making things better for everybody. I think that was really my perspective. And that's what I like about the idea of a union as opposed to—everybody for themselves, you go out and you get your raise, or you do this for yourself. Just having that kind of consciousness about—you can have one job that gets paid pretty well, maybe, for whatever reason, but unless everybody working that job is kind of raised up, the job isn't done. It means nothing. It really is gaining respect. Having people paid for the work that they're doing. Ending any kind of bias by sex or race in the workplace; I'll go along with that. And that is a meaningful goal. So I think just being part of something that had that larger meaning, meant a lot to me. More than whatever I might have done personally. That's what's important to me. And also something that I think people need to think about more than just themselves—people really need to think about the larger issues that are surrounding whatever employment they do, whether they're a temp at Microsoft, a contractor, whether they're working with dangerous chemicals—whatever they think personally about their safety or their livelihood or their family, their ability to be with their family—they're not the only one that has those issues. And so it makes a lot more sense to me to try to address the problems on a bigger scale—much bigger scale, and I really liked being part of that.

....Absolutely. With a union, people are very isolated. Very isolated. And with a union, with an advocate for them, whether it's pressure of hundreds of people going to the legislature, or just the fact that you've got a contract in your hand when you go talk to your boss, there's just a lot more power too that people have to negotiate for what—

working conditions and everything. There's just a tremendous difference. When I first started here I thought, "Oh, it's just me and my office and that's it." I didn't really see the larger picture. And just having the knowledge that there are x number of secretaries, x number of program coordinators. That these articles in the contract pertain to all these people—just having that perspective alone really gives one just a much better feel for the lay of the land, and how things work, and how they're part of a larger picture. And how nothing is necessarily a given, that things can be negotiated.

And the kind of networking that happens because of the union, too. I think the union is probably, I would say, one of the best networking facilitators on the campus! For people who otherwise would not come in contact with each other. That's very valuable. Very valuable. It's a huge campus, of many isolated little bureaus and offices and departments, that may have no relation to each other. Yet people are doing very similar work and they have similar concerns. And just knowing that the others are out there is tremendous! It's not something the university promotes among its employees, or not nearly to the extent that the union does.

Were you involved with the discussions about uniting with other unions, and "the mergers," as they call it, or had that happened—

I wasn't at the actual meeting in Kentucky, the one where they really hashed that out. But yes, I was involved with it.

What were some of the issues and concerns. Do you remember?

I think with anything, any kind of change in the ideas: is it going to be better? Is it going to help us attain our goals, or not? And how people, whatever they felt about that, positive or negative, I think that was just kind of a standard concerns that anyone would have with a big change like that. I feel fortunate that I was able to be involved during that transition phase, because I think things worked pretty well. I felt positive about the way that transition worked.

Can you say something about that transition? Nobody's talked about that.

From my perspective it was—we restructured, and had to get a group of people from the two unions that were [con]merging together [and/in] other unions, and hash out bylaws and rules and make plans for when are we going to meet, how are we going to meet, what's our structure going to be—and in the process of doing that, got to know each other better, and came up with something we could be proud of. I think just the process of working through it helped. Because it was a big unknown for everybody. I think the rationale, the idea behind restructuring made a lot of sense. The unions have to maximize what your power—maximize what you're doing and be efficient, for the membership, and for all kinds of reasons it made sense, but then exactly the nuts and bolts of it—how are we going to do this, and how do people feel about change. Hopefully, everybody I think came through it all right. I felt positive about it.

It seems to have worked. Tell us a little bit about how you ended up in the professional staff position.

For me personally it was basically I work in a department that has five directors reporting to an assistant vice-president, or associate vice-president. And every single one of their administrative people was professional except for me, for a couple of years. And it finally became kind of ridiculous. (laughs)

You were doing the job, in other words, you were entitled.

Right. It had changed. The others had changed or been restructured, but basically the bottom line was I was the only one that wasn't professional at a certain point, and then it took a few years and I decided this would make sense.

Did you have to petition for it somehow, or how did it work?

I filled out paperwork for it, but it was one of those things where the job itself had changed. So unless I wanted to leave the job, I thought this would make sense.

So you got the university to re-classify it, is that how it happened?

Yes. And like I say, they'd already re-classified the other jobs.

Does the union work on issues like that, getting re-classified, and more clearly defined?

We've always had people who have been in kind of job specification, classification. The union's always had resources for people who are thinking of petitioning to be reclassified. And that's one of the things that's great. In terms of professional to classified staff, though, I think there've been issues about the university kind of wholesale trying to professionalize certain jobs that didn't make sense—we've had unfair labor practices over it.

Is it something to get people out of the union?

For a time we were concerned. There are guidelines, and there always have been guidelines. And for a while it seemed to us that the university was overstepping those for certain job classifications. There was an unfair labor practice filed on that; that was a few years ago—I remember helping with the research on that a little bit. I'm not even sure what the outcome—Kim would know. But I think basically we made the point and it was either to be renegotiated or we were to go back to the rules that had been established. There were always guidelines for what was professional staff. So my job did fall under those.

And of course I imagine that for women and men like yourself who work many years at the university and gain a lot of expertise, have college degrees, whatever—

their ambition—your—is to move into professional positions at some point, and create ladders for people to do that. Has the union been involved in—

I think the union has been banging their head against whatever that ceiling is—glass or whatever—for so long, trying...I remember in one of the first negotiating teams I was ever on, I think the word "career path" was coming up over and over. So there are things, yes, absolutely, the union—it's not as easy to promote at the U. as it should be; there are many things that could be changed that would help that; there's staff training but does that necessarily translate into experience as far as a job application's concerned? We've been dealing with this for years and years and years, and felt that it would be wonderful to help employees create career paths, move up the ladder, in any way we can. I've tried to—I think successfully in some cases we've actually got them to add union classifications at a certain level.

What does that mean?

I'm just going to throw out—Neal used to say, what was it? Worm digger one and two and three or whatever—he'd come up with fictitious classifications. But basically, rather than say at a certain stage, there's nowhere else you can go when you're earthworm digger 3, we'd say well what about a 4 and a lead and a manage—something like that. We would propose a track that people could go to. And if there is work that seems to warrant another classification, in that bargaining unit. And that's one thing that I hope will occur. I don't know what's going to happen with our reorganization, at the state level, of all of the state employees.

You mean the one that the union's trying to work on, or is the university doing something?

The whole state is trying to streamline, and...the bulk I think actually now will be union classifications. But in the effort to rehash the entire state employment system, going to the new civil service law, I hope that maybe one of the things that will happen is that career paths can be created. I don't know, but I'm hoping. Maybe now, finally, that would be part of what's bargained.

Do you feel optimistic about the future of this union? It's a slight variation on the last question, since you're not actually working with the union at this moment.

I am always optimistic about everything. (laughs) I'm an optimistic person. Absolutely.

What keeps you going as an optimistic person, do you think?

Looking around today, I don't know. It might get me certified. But I think just the amount of sheer energy and good will and good people and the fact that it's right. And I just believe [it/that] hey, you know, that's enough...there's a lot of positive energy there and there's a lot of need, and so I'm optimistic.

Ok, thank you.

Thank you!

END of interview.