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Interviewed by Ann Froines
Brookline, Massachusetts
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Janet, tell the story about how you entered 9 to 5. What made you get involved in the first place?

In 1973 at that point I had been an office worker for about five years, although I think it would be disingenuous to say I was a grassroots office worker. That really wasn't the case. I had recently gotten politicized. I wasn't somebody who had been active in a lot of the sixties movements for various reasons. But at this particular point in my life I had contact with a number of people who were more political than I was. A little light bulb went off in my head about it.

I guess you would say I was radicalized, without organizations or movement. I became very interested in organizing.

In Boston at that time there was a lot of hospital organizing going on, and for a while I thought that was what I was going to do. Meanwhile, I was working at Harvard University–of all places. I say that because some of the other founders of 9 to 5 were also working there, unbeknownst to me. Not a bastion of good treatment for office workers. I had been involved in some rebelliousness on that job. And I actually think I saw a little clip in a newspaper, I can't remember what. It was something about a meeting that was gathering information about office workers. So it was before the actual launch of the organization. I went to some small meeting. I can even remember how many people were there. This was a loose founding group of people that were thinking about launching 9 to 5, and after that I decided to go back and talk to some of the more active people in that group. And that was Ellen Cassedy and Karen Nussbaum. Somehow or other, in talking to them, it was, sure, you can work with us.

I remember one story that was always amusing to me. As a joke a number of months later–well, we had these precious file cards. Our recruitment lists were like gold. So it was a rolodex with contacts on it. And they had place a little card in the rolodex for me to stumble across with my name on it as a recruit was said, "seems fine but wears earth shoes." (Laughs.) As if to say, culturally she's a little alternative. You know, we were looking always not to find alternative folks, but mainstream office workers. So that was always a joke between us. I wasn't like wildly not mainstream but I was certainly of a different ilk than your mainstream office worker.

I started working with Karen and Ellen pre-launch, until we actually started the organization. I remember at first we only had money to pay Ellen, and I think Karen was still working at Harvard, or someplace, so there was this period of time where we had this one tiny little grant, probably from Boston-Cambridge Ministries Concerned, or whatever

that organization was called. Then gradually as we got a little bit more grant money, Karen and I started being paid.

This was a reflection of a certain brand of young people at the time in their twenties. I had been semi-fired from that Harvard job, because of some organizing, so I think I was on unemployment. You got unemployment even if you were fired at that point. So it was OK, living on a shoestring. It seems to me that first year I made $8000 when I finally did get paid. Different era.

What were some of your own experiences as an office worker in those five years? Did you experience a lack of respect at Harvard?

Absolutely! All the basic rhetoric or examples that we put out in the early days that we drew from women we met, was very much in my experience, too. And that included everything from being asked to do all kinds of work--whether or not it was in a job description you had never seen, because whether it existed or not, why should you know about it–to people walking in and saying, "isn't there anybody here?" That's a common experience; the office worker as part of the wallpaper.

I worked in places that probably had more liberal pretensions than private industry. I worked for the state of Massachusetts as an office worker. I worked for the Harvard Law Library, and then eventually for the Harvard Business School. And I also worked for women, which is some ways made no difference, but it some ways it did. So I don't think I suffered some of the greatest indignities that can happen. . .

How did it make a difference? Can you give examples?

Well, I worked for the state Department of Education in their resource library, so my boss was a librarian. It wasn't the kind of atmosphere you might experience if you were in a large office with many office workers and male bosses. There was that kind of buffer for me.

When I worked at the Harvard Business School, however, it wasn't like that. I had a funny kind of job. It wasn't exactly office work. We were graders for the Business School students, which sounds like it ought to be a high level job, but in fact was like a factory production line. We were given a template of what a good case study looked like, then our job was to evaluate them, according to this template, say what they had and hadn't done, whether we knew anything about business. I can't remember if we actually gave the grade or not.

It could be that I am remembering this wrong. Could it be that we were being paid piecework? It felt that way, and they kept upping the number of papers that we were expected to turn out. And at that point I started to talk with other workers in that area about signing a petition that we couldn't do that much, work that fast. It got to a certain level of development–the organizing–when I got the call into the office, and the speech about, "you don't seem to be happy here, et cetera."

How did you feel about the women's movement, which was also organizing about that time? Had you participated?

No, I hadn't. I was certainly aware of it, and knew people who were active. It wasn't something that I was drawn to, organizationally. I'm not sure I can explain that. I was much more drawn to organizing on job issues. I think partly I wasn't drawn to the cultural aspects of the women's movement, and I felt I had become politically active late, compared to some of my counterparts. What influenced me more was deciding that I was a socialist and seeing everything circling around how work produced wealth. It seems very old-fashioned to be saying that these days. But I really came to see that as one of the things that needed to change.

Today we talk about it as economic justice, on a global level.

Yes, phrases have changed. I don't want to make it sound like I didn't think the women's movement was critical. In fact, we were very conscious of our rhetoric and how we talked about what we were trying to do in 9to5. I very much felt from my own experience as an office worker, that the intersection of issues that women face, with the issues that women faced as workers, were defining factors about what was going on for women office workers, and a defining factor for how they could be mobilized.

Did you consider yourself a feminist? Did that issue ever come up for you in those early months of 9 to 5?

I know there was a concern in early 9 to 5 about relating to women office workers without scaring them off. . .About women's liberation. . .another thing I remember about writing in our newsletter, and saying and reflecting from what we heard from women, the phrase, "I'm not a women's libber, but. . ." And then a long list of things that happened to me all because I'm a woman. I think actually that was how I related to the women's movement as well. I'd like to think of myself as a feminist, but that isn't really how I thought of myself at the time. It wasn't my source of identity. And so I could relate to the women that we were organizing because I didn't feel that was an expression of who I was or that I had that identity either.

When you were growing up, did you have any knowledge of union or workplace struggles?

Yes. Both my parents were union members. My father was a union activist. Again, it's a funny twist on what you might think. I didn't come from a working class background. My mother was a school teacher, and active in her teachers' union. My father was a musician. He was a violist in the Cleveland Symphony Orchestra. I think that conjures up in people's minds right away some kind of high-faluting, possibly snobbish kind of job. But the fact of the matter was in his many, many years with the orchestra, he didn't have a full year's work, they didn't have a pension plan, he always had a second job selling clothing at the May Company Department store in Cleveland. And there were

many ways in which they had poor working conditions. They went on strike several times. He was part of negotiating committees and strike committees. I remember being at the kitchen table and writing out signs for the picket line. I remember one sign that said, "you can't run an orchestra on a string." I think one of us made that up–we were so proud of that. (Laughs.)

Actually I have a lot of pride about that aspect of my father's work. I remember that after he died, a year after he died there was a stone setting for him, and a number of orchestra members came. When they talked about him, they talked about their union activity together, not their music-making together, which of course was a huge thing. It made me realize that it was a big influence in my life.

Describe in some detail some campaigns that were important to you in your work with 9 to 5...Or some of the kinds of tactics you developed in organizing.

It is a bit easier for me [to discuss tactics]. . .shame on me for not remembering the details of some campaigns. There were wonderful campaigns and the exciting thing about being with 9 to 5 from its start in Boston is that we were making it all up. We were really making it up. It is one of my fondest memories. And I've continued to like jobs where you make it up. Our tactics, and what we were trying to do were very much informed by a certain kind of mass organizing, direct action tactics. I had a funny experience recently. Tell me if I am digressing too much. My son read Reveille for Radicals by Saul Alinsky, and he became so excited. It was a bit of a transformative experience for him. I wanted to say to him, "David, a lot as happened since Saul Alinsky, and a lot of people don't like Saul Alinsky." But that light bulb going off is something I really remember. I think our point of reference was the Midwest Academy in Chicago, which at the time was training organizers for direct action, citizens organizations, and other kinds of things.

We felt like what we were doing was finding ways to mobilize office workers very publicly, even if they couldn't yet feel powerful enough to organize on their job. We could develop campaigns highlighting how office workers were treated, and construct campaigns against large corporations using whatever levers we could, and thinking of who we could possibly get to ally with this cause, everyone from media, regulatory agencies, to office workers. Who were the "enemies" and what were their pressure points, the enemies being management, basically.

We had a committee structure at that point, and it was pretty broad. We always took on a lot. We always had a big idea of what we were doing. And that was great. So we had a universities committee, we had a publishing committee, and we had an insurance committee, a banking committee. Fr a while I was in charge of the Temps. Committee. We had a fairly sophisticated, we thought, analysis of the role temporary workers played in the office workforce. We did some lively actions about temporary workers. We soon discovered that that wasn't a very stable part for building the organization for the obvious reason that temporary workers circulate.

My assignment was always banking and insurance, and the best things that we did, I think, is that we became very adept at making contacts on the inside, as any union would need to do. Although we weren't a union. And we did that first by our famous 9 to 5 surveys; we were always out at subway stops and in front of companies handing out surveys, getting information from office workers, which then we could use to inform our Office Workers Bill of Rights, and all the other kinds of statements that writ large what the issues were, so that they would become legitimized. Then office workers would feel, yes, I do have rights. That was something we were always talking about. What it resulted in was there was always a tear slip at the bottom which said, would you like more information, would you like to meet someone for lunch, would you like the results of the survey? Anything innocuous that we could put to prompt someone to write down their name. As in all organizing, our laser focus was to get back to those women.

My memories of 9 to 5 are endless numbers of lunches with women office workers in every place imaginable: the company cafeteria, the corner deli. I loved the one woman who would say, sure you can come to lunch in the First National Bank of Liberty Mutual. Then you felt like you were in the belly of the beast and all the people you wanted to talk to were right there. You could see the dynamics and such.

We would get inside information from office workers whether or not they could become vocal participants. We were always looking for them to take baby steps up the scale to become activist members and then leaders, but many couldn't. From them, we often got information that we could then turn into leaflets. And we had newsletters for different companies. We weren't a union but we had enough information from inside to construct campaigns on issues that women were complaining about, and I think completely scare the bejesus out of management because we knew something, and all of a sudden it was on the street, and if we could get it in the media, we did. So it was those kind of pressure tactics.

Did you distribute the newsletter out in front of the company?

Oh yeah, oh yeah! And we would give them to men, women. The idea was "we got the goods on you." We did a lot of very roundabout pressure tactics, which, when I think about it, you know, after 9 to 5–this is probably presumptuous, and so I'll stand corrected by anybody–but after 9 to 5, it became more common for unions to create campaigns that went beyond the straight, card-signing union campaigns. You can see these days, whether it is about economic justice or about creating alliances, or consumer involvement in a campaign.

I think that is what we were all about. People used to criticize us for not being a union, like what's wrong with you? Are you anti-union? Of course, we weren't, we just had this strategy that we thought we were implementing, that made use of this kind of direct action approach. I have to say, I think we were very effective. These companies were scared. We got First National Bank to give raises. We got job descriptions changed. Although we often threatened the court route, we were not keen in filing discrimination complaints, and going through the plodding process of EEOC or Mass. Commission

Against Discrimination. I associate that more with N.O.W. and the women's movement, those groups that, shamefully, we tended to scorn. I don't think that was very good. But I think we felt like organizing is where it's at, collective action is where it's at. And I think that for what we were able to do, we were very effective using direct action to accomplish goals. And the goal wasn't just to get a raise for women. It was really to create a national movement that would have an effect on women's organizing, have an effect on the union movement. I think that, for a period of time, we did that.

In a way, you've already answered this. How would you characterize the different approach of 9 to 5 to organizing, or District 925 to union organizing?

I feel very lucky. Not only was I with 9 to 5 when it first began, but I went through a number of exciting transitions in our organizational development. After organizing 9 to 5 successfully in Boston, we did feel like we had a model. Our first step in branching out, we decided to go regional in 1976 or 1977. At that point, my job came to be regional organizer for 9 to 5. I can't remember if I was also doing local, Boston organizing. Because we had started raising more money and hiring more staff. We had to look a little more sophisticated. I remember I bought my first car at that point because I had to drive to Providence, New Haven, and Amherst. We had these itty-bitty outlying 9 to 5 chapters in Amherst, Brattleboro, Providence, and Hartford, not New Haven.

Anyway, that was a precursor to us starting a national organization and at that point I was the national organizer who oversaw the development of chapters in different cities and trained the staff. The other transition I went through was as we tried to evolve a union strategy, because it was never, in our minds, that we only wanted to have a women's organization, or a women's work organization alone. We wanted to use it to prompt union organizing among office workers. We were somewhat circumspect about that–it's funny looking back on it. We felt it was really important that 9 to 5 <u>not</u> be seen as a union.

Why?

Because we thought that strategically there was a step in between. Everybody had trouble understanding this. Management never believed it, they're after us, this is the start [they thought]. . .of course it was, but you know they might have feared it more than we had the capacity to deliver on it. And unions thought, what are they doing? They thought, some women's libbers. . . Yet, I feel like we were all very careful students of labor history. And I credit us for that. We knew what we were doing. This was thought out.

We felt for many, many years at 9 to 5, that any union work had to be kept separate. And I'm not so sure that it was as necessary as we thought it was, looking back and seeing how you combine union campaigns and direct action campaigns.

The other transition was that we started purposefully to try to connect ourselves with, or be able to spin off, an entity that <u>would</u> organize office workers as a union. In typical

fashion, it wasn't just that we wanted to prompt that activity; we wanted to control that activity. We want to be part of the labor movement. And so the three of us, Karen, Ellen, and I, were part of discussions with a number of unions in Boston about which one of them would take a project under certain terms that would organize women office workers, particularly in the private sector.

And that was very exciting. I remember talking to UAW, District 65, and SEIU. I think we talked with others as well, but those were the three that were doing more active organizing.

It's kind of amazing that we had the leverage that they would talk to us. We were very conscious of wanting to place ourselves. . .you know, there were a lot of questions that to me are still fascinating about where we shall place ourselves if we are going to have some kind of impact. When I say control, it wasn't personal control, it was we wanted to have influence and develop a model that we thought was different. It would put women in control, it would bring aspects of the women's movement and the labor movement together that could truly make a commitment to organizing the unorganized workers, in this case, women workers who had been pretty much ignored. And yet, would have enough power and backing that it would be a mainstream and well-financed effort, which as I remember at the time, was why we didn't go to District 65. It eventually merged itself.

I think we picked the right home, and I dropped off the labor scene so I don't have all the history of SEIU. Certainly it's going through some interesting changes or challenges right now. I think they made good on their commitment to organizing unorganized workers, even if it hasn't been wildly successful in the office worker world.

How did 9 to 5 raise money to pay for staff?

We wrote grants. It was a non-profit, grant-funded organization. We even had government grants. Those were the day s of VISTA and CETA and all kinds of things that I guess still exist under other names. A grass roots organization could get VISTA volunteers or the local CETA volunteers. We did a tremendous amount of foundation fund-raising. We also did a lot of grassroots fund-raising, and we taught our members how to do that. And we taught our chapters how. . .we were very sophisticated in terms of our training. And that's the part I was particularly involved in. We were really about teaching people, not just how to organize, but how to build organizations. And so fund-raising was an aspect of that. So we really worked hard to do things like ad books and cocktail parties honoring some government official that had helped us particularly. We got into door–to-door canvassing at some point. This was something other direct action groups were doing so it wasn't just us. It was a huge amount of effort.

END of SIDE A
START of SIDE B

The staff was differentiated into directors, organizers, office managers, canvass directors, fund-raisers. It didn't last that long because we went the way of all non-profits. It is hard to sustain that fund-raising forever. But I guess we were hot, we did a tremendous amount of work and got large grants to do it.

What values did you try to represent in your organizing? Anything you want to add? I am thinking of things like the value of "democracy" in an organization.

I see. We took leadership development very seriously. And we believed that women, and mostly young women, had never had the opportunity to take on leadership roles. And so we place a high value on supporting and training women, and allowing them to be in situations where they could blossom. One of the most wonderful aspects of this work that I am sure others will tell you about is watching people blossom, just as we blossomed. I certainly experienced that, and we were able to bring that experience to a huge number of women who had never done anything political in their lives, or anything activist in their lives. They ended up making speeches before large numbers of people or leading demonstrations or researching company structure, many, many things. In that regard, I think we were truly a grassroots organization and activated a lot of people. And a lot of people, their lives were transformed. I'm sure if you could find people now, they would talk about 9 to 5 as an incredibly important experience in their lives.

On the other hand, you said values, democratic, and I thought, yeah, but we were quite orchestrated and is that a value? We didn't believe in consensus. In order to do the things that we did. . .And we really did learn by the seat of our pants, and some of the experiences were quite painful. We had a mission and an idea of what we were trying to accomplish. We structured the organization and worked with leaders to come in line with that approach to organizing.

At the time there were a lot of people, especially in a place like Boston, which isn't the most mainstream place, there was an active left that was looking for organizing opportunities. We had to work hard to keep on the road we were on, because there were a lot of people who wanted to influence us to be more overtly radical, or more overtly feminist, or to take up another issue besides office work. "Why aren't you also talking about" whatever, the war in Vietnam, and it went on from there. So we worked hard to maintain the focus of what we were doing and there are all kinds of stories of chapters around that weren't able to do that in an effective way. They fell apart or had a tremendous amount of conflict. I don't mean always between them and those who wanted them to be more radical. It could have been other groupings of people, wild and crazy situations, where you watch an organization fall apart. Or on the flip side of that, an organization that is not able to break out of an active group of people who wanted to organize office workers but didn't approach it in a way that allowed them to appeal to office workers. Those were things that we identified and worked with people to recognize as barriers and stumbling blocks to avoid or get beyond.

You were there for part of the history of the National Organization of Working Women, and I remember that it had national conventions and a representative structure, so in that sense also it was a democratic organization.

Absolutely. We always had elections. We elected chair people of our different committees, the banking committees, the committees I mentioned. Also the structural part of the organization, like the fund-raising, et cetera. And we had a steering committee of the organization. So I don't mean to imply it wasn't democratic. I do mean to imply that the staff took a very deliberate and conscious role in the organization. Of course, I think that always has to be the case for the thing to actually work, which probably pegs me in a certain away.

I was very much present for a good chunk of the national organization. I was in the organization when it began, and then for ten years. That spans having chapters in 18 cities, having a national board, a national training institute. We always had a working women's summer school for about three days. We had several hundred office workers come from all over the country to these, which were launching points for national campaigns. We began to have national campaigns, take up national policy work to some extent. The summer schools were also training institutes and they definitely were structured. It wasn't like they were being run by a few people.

Even though you weren't campaigning for union representation, were you ever involved in organizing where you felt like women's jobs might be at risk?

Yes, we got involved with SEIU, created Local 925 here, and then eventually District 925. I was still working with the organization. We would sometimes loan ourselves out for union drives that were going on. I remember going to Pittsburgh for several weeks for a University of Pittsburgh organizing campaign. But even within 9 to 5 and our direct action organizing, there were times when women we worked with were jeopardized on the job. Because we were running outside campaigns we would often work with women who either themselves had designs on getting their co-workers together to do anything from drive the boss crazy, to plan a meeting to go confront the boss. That was pretty common with our campaigns, that there would be an inside and an outside campaign, and you had to take great care with people. I think in this way we were tremendously respectful of talking with people about what's possible while still protecting them as much as we could. And also we didn't want to scare anybody off. The point wasn't to find the loudest hothead in the office. That was likely the person we would avoid! We were always looking for the most respected worker–as you always would in any kind of union drive–the person that other people come to with their problems. The one that has been on the job years already. And they had more to lose; they weren't the folks that could speak out most readily. We would go to those people and work with them to build a network in their department. We would map out the departments, and we would talk about little issues and where to start with attracting people to organize on the job. And this was even before the union stuff came into play.

It is easy to think of 9 to 5 as just a direct action, on the street, with-the media kind of group. But we really prided ourselves on doing inside organizing and structuring of campaigns within the company. And if you could do that it certainly made the outside campaign all the more effective. It was very hard to get too far with that in insurance and banking, which is where I primarily worked. We always held to the theory that women office workers who were in slightly more liberal positions, who had it slightly better, had the slack to do more organizing. So publishing and university organizing was probably more active at that time, and there some of our members who were very active put their jobs in a lot of jeopardy. I can't remember specifics, but I'm sure one or two got fired. So we were asking people to make a big commitment.

In insurance and banking was it fear of losing their jobs that made women office workers reluctant to organize inside?

Yes, and the structure of the companies was very different. Rather than an office workers, an assistant editor, and an editor, for example. In publishing we were organizing editors and assistant editors as well as office workers. The lines are fuzzy. You could be an assistant editor, come in every day, function and be treated like an office worker. Your professionalism might not be respected. That is a different structure than an insurance company, which had some offices with executive secretaries, or a small number of secretaries. But there were also places where there was a department filled with secretaries, and one boss. It was a much more anonymous circumstance. You knew you were a low level worker, you were very replaceable. Your vulnerability was far greater.

Also, we had to confront the fact that insurance companies and banks were more and more developing data processing centers, as computers came into play more. There was a stratification of the work going on. And we could see how it was becoming much more like factory work. You had places that weren't right downtown that were not very accessible. You couldn't easily stand out in front of them, because they were off highways, or had long driveways into parking lots. They weren't accessible by "T" (subway). It was different and there women were working in circumstances that made them more fearful. On the one hand you would think, oh, more like factory work, those people will be the first to organize. But instead, there were reasons why they would and reasons why they wouldn't. And in the early time we were at, they generally wouldn't. They were the lowest level workers.

Do you think their levels of education were relevant?

I think the women in those jobs were from more working class stances, which is not to say that status is a barrier to organizing at all. But I think that they felt less empowered, probably had less room to maneuver in their own lives. In Boston, that was where you saw more of the minority workforce, women of color working. That was less true of other cities where we organized, where the workforce was much more integrated. As you know, that's not Boston.

And so those workers were segregated, in a way. And I think Boston 9 to 5 reflected that, and that was a barrier that we did not conquer.

You've talked a lot about leadership development in the organization. Were there any discussions about developing women's leadership as women? Or just as organizers?

We talked about both. I guess if I was thinking about organization leaders as women, we were aware of and experiencing all the fears and hesitancies that women function with in finding a voice, and being able to be powerful and in charge. We were very aware of that. We often gave speech workshops. We had principles for everything. Everything we did was broken down, in "how-to" in a really wonderful way that would make it accessible to others. I remember giving speech demonstrations, a before and after. The before was filled with painful hesitancies and question marks, and "I guess" or "I don't know" or "maybe"–the kinds of things that characterize women's speech when we don't feel like we are being heard. We were very conscious of that. We did it in summer schools, and in our chapters, workshops and trainings for women as an ongoing feature. We trained our staff, our leaders. We did it every year, maybe several times a year. We did it before we launched campaigns. For example, the insurance committee would be about to launch a campaign against John Hancock. In addition to strategizing about how you were going to do that, you would also be training the women about each aspect of that campaign, what the leadership roles were and how you would enact them.

I don't know how we did all that, how we managed to squeeze all that in, and yet those were really strong elements. We were very aware that as women we were taking charge in a way that hadn't been done before.

Despite my earlier statements, it was completely liberating to work in an organization of women run by women. That was a wonderful thing.

When you think back on it, how does it look to you, the way your own leadership role and skills developed?

I think of that corny line, "everything I needed to know I learned in kindergarten." For me, it's everything I needed to learn I learned in 9 to 5. I think you come with a certain amount of direction. For example, I was used to performing. I grew up in a musical family, and I was real shy. . . but I played piano for many years. Monthly I had to perform before a good number of people from the time I was seven through 17. Monthly, I fantasized about falling down the steps and breaking my arm so I couldn't play and wouldn't have to go out there! I value that experience, because until you do things you don't know what your capacity is. And the opportunities that I got in 9 to 5 as a leader, primarily from the staff standpoint, were phenomenal. One of the, to this day, was a very formative experience. I love public speaking. I got to do a lot of that. I came to realize that I was good at teaching. I loved doing the training.

I loved doing it in unusual ways, in funny ways. What was so good about our training was that we would have new organizers, new directors, maybe about ten of them, come from around the country to 9 to 5 in Boston. They were immediately placed in the organization. They took classes where they received training in all the aspects of our work, but then we put them out in the street, so they had to do everything we did as a staff person under supervision. So it was like a brief apprenticeship along with training. Of course, that's the best kind.

What is a director in 9 to 5?

Most of the chapters had a director and staff organizers. Paid staff. And we would also bring leaders who weren't paid staff, for these kinds of trainings as well. But we learned how to fund-raise, how to design campaigns, how to layout a newsletter, design a flyer, how to confront a government official, you know, on an on. All the nuts and bolts were there.

The other aspect of developing leadership. . .we thought big, we had a grand scheme, and a sense of being historic in some way. So there was a lot of training into how to actualize big ideas into very practical strategies and tactics that would work.

Did anything of this training include diversity training with respect to race or ethnicity?

No, and I'd be curious as you talk to other people, if it existed beyond my experience, which is possible.

I am referring to conscious training. I had a lot of contact with other cities because, as the supervisor of those chapters, I would travel to them, and I would have weekly phone contact with their directors. I could see in places where the organizations were well built they were integrated and had women of color as leaders, and the staff people would be very conscious of that. And that is something I would talk to them about, and be conscious of. I would check in regularly, because we absolutely had to be representative. And we knew that. So I would never say we were unconscious about this, but I don't think 9 to 5 in Boston was an integrated organization. It's a combination of reflecting the workforce and also some lack of consciousness on our part about what that task would look like and how to accomplish it. We tried several times, and we weren't entirely successful.

I know you wanted to talk about family issues. As they applied to the workforce and women—again I'm reflecting the very early days. In the early days, I don't think we knew from Adam about issues facing working women who were married with kids. We had some older women in the organization, women married with kids, and particularly I remember some very colorful outspoken older women. And age discrimination was something we talked about. But in the very early days we weren't conscious of family issues, which, of course, now have become huge, in any kind of issue-based organizing and organizational efforts. We didn't have kids yet; we were young, in our twenties,

which doesn't mean you can't have kids as an organizer, but all of us didn't. And I think it wasn't on our radar screen. I think as we grew and became more of a national organization, of course, it was. I know 9 to 5 in later years, and in the union work, has very consciously taken up issues of child care, home, and family. In those first 5-10 years they were low on the list. And it probably affected our organizing in ways we weren't aware of then.

Did you feel the aims of 925 (and 9 to 5) were realized?

Yes and no. I remember reading a lot about labor history and about certain periods of time when women organized in the past, and the associations they created. We weren't the first. And although it's grown a little vague to me now, I had that feeling about them, and I had that feeling about us. As you get older you see the long march of things, and so your ability to permanently transform things falls into a more realistic view. And you see that had a transformative effect in the march of things. I guess that's how I see 9 to 5, and maybe even 925 from what I know of the district's history, and its eventual demise.

I feel like we really built an organization with real people in it, no doubt! We did affect the labor movement, and I think we did affect the women's movement. I think we brought the two together creatively. But because we were creating an organization outside the typical power structure, we ultimately didn't have the power to sustain ourselves exactly as we wanted to within the institutions that we joined up with—the union world. Although we did pretty good, for a long time. We were also in a particular time, and we were willing something that didn't happen: office workers in the private sector didn't organize en masse.

And that was one of the original goals of 9 to 5?

Yes, absolutely. We staked out private sector clerical organizing as what we wanted to do. There was union activity in the public sector, so although we had members and there were some activities, that wasn't where we were campaigning. Nor were we trying to create a public-sector union. That was the deal; there were other unions that had the public sector, and they were already working in. Of course, that was much quote/unquote easier to be organizing in it. For a variety of reasons, we were able to take the ride about as far as you could ride it. And we did a great job. But the ultimate goal of organizing private sector clerical workers has not come to pass.

It would take a while to describe all the changes in the economy that emerged to make it more difficult. And all the changes in companies. . . and everything. So in some ways you could say we weren't able to accomplish our goals. In other ways I feel like—and the reason I like this project—is I think there is a legacy to 9 to 5 and 925. Although, and this is going to sound disingenuous, I feel very modest personally about all this, and I do, I feel like the organization has a place in history and people will, at least should be, reading about it, like I read about those times when things were advanced by women organizing.

Will you describe the impact of 925 on SEIU in particular, and organized labor, in general?

Well, my view is a very early one, because I was completely associated with 9 t-o 5 as we used to say, and didn't cross over to the union side. I don't know, that's interesting. . .that always loomed in the last years, as we got to have a parallel organization that was doing union organizing. I lot of our staff did make that crossover from being 9 to 5 organizers originally to becoming union organizers in local and district 925. And I didn't, and I also left the organization before a lot of the organizing in district 925 took place, so I know there are people that can speak much more knowledgeably than I.

I left 9 to 5 right before having my first child. It was just because of that, although, to my surprise, I ending up staying out of the work force for a full year with her, and working part-time for many, many years after that. My individual role to motherhood, well, I didn't stop working, but I tried to be home as much as I could with the kids. Partly it was that I sort of had grown up with 9 to 5, and I felt that I needed to organize in another setting. I needed to see what that's like. And also, we were at a more painful transition time when I left and I was unhappy. We were not raising as much funds. We weren't able to fund so many chapters; we were experimenting with individual membership and volunteer chapters. We had split into three national offices so our very tight esprit de corps in Boston, was now in Cleveland, Boston, and Philadelphia, then Washington. I had run a certain cycle, and even though this was the most important thing in my life, I made a choice to leave in 1983.

But I think 925 did have an impact on the labor movement. I think the fact that we were eventually able to negotiate a national union structure for clerical workers is pretty amazing. We used to talk about a lot in 9 to 5 about smoke and mirrors because the direct action campaigns relied a lot of what management <u>thought</u> we were capable of. Then it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. We found the pressure points we could make them give in on certain things, but did we have real power? Other than the power of bad publicity and the pressure of regulatory agencies, which we were very good at using, ultimately, we didn't have power. So the fact that a union, in fact, several unions were interested and would take this on is pretty remarkable. But I think partly what was out there was this vast unorganized sector of the workforce at a time when union membership was already shrinking. People were beginning to realize that the service sectors were the new frontier for organizing. And we were credible because we were there first. We had file boxes with names in them. Whether they completely understood, and I think they had trouble understanding what we were trying to do out there, what we were calling organizing, they were impressed enough to deal.

The fact that we insisted it had to be a separate section of the union, that it would preserve a structure where women organizers that were experienced in this could be in control, was respected. Then those that ventured into labor unions had tons of battles to fight inside, about preserving their autonomy, their independence, their funding for the campaigns that they wanted—they can speak to that. That's not something I experienced. And I don't mean to characterize it as a bed of roses, but I think the impact we had was

being part of a new wave of organizing unorganized workers, in a movement that had sort of calcified around an industrial base. That was a big difference. I think we really did have a big impact in changing a lot of men's perspective, or superficial behavior toward organizing women, and dealing with women leaders. Lord knows, there was a huge amount of sexism in the labor movement that we encountered. But at least they figured out they weren't going to succeed too well maintaining that level of sexism. Not that it was wiped out.

And we certainly produced a whole slew of very wonderful astute women trade unionists who weren't in the labor movement, and now are, to this day. A number of the people you will be talking to are still union leaders, and sometimes in other unions. Dorine, for example, is now in the Massachusetts Teachers Association. So we seeded the union movement with a lot of new people.

What kind of work did you do after you left 9 to 5, and are you doing now?

Well, for a number of years, I didn't see how I was going to be a mom and an organizer at the same time. So I simulated something I thought might be a little close while not really doing it. After being home a year with my daughter, I went back to work. I had a series of jobs over six years that I basically came to hate. I worked for the state of Massachusetts coordinating community-based programs in public health. Of course, I have no public health background, but, see, I always felt that anything we learned in 9 to 5 would allow us to do anything, any time, in any place. That was our attitude, and I pursued it with that, maybe mistaken, notion.

I was hired because they were funding communities to develop coalitions, organizations to deal with complicated social issues like low birth weight, infant mortality, and teen pregnancy. Those were the issues I worked on. My job was to help communities to come together and develop organizations, and then programming and strategies to deal with these pernicious public health problems. I hated working for the state, I hated being that far away from the actual organizing, or grass roots work. Although by the tenth year of 9 to 5 I had pretty much shot my wad at making evening phone calls, which is a major feature of the job!

Then I got interested in public education, I think because my kids were going into school. And I decided that I wanted to. . .but I was so influenced by 9 to 5. I never wanted to just work in a school, or become an educator. I wasn't interested in teaching. I always wanted to be on the border of worlds that I could bring together, and create some kind of organizing that brought things together in ways that hadn't happened. And so I got interested in parent involvement in schools, and community involvement in education.

I'd dropped out of college, and had never gotten my B.A. all this time. So I decided to get my B. A., and so I had to do some reading on public education. I thought I would work in an urban school system and do some kind of organizing work with parents. The fact that I ended up in Brookline was a surprise to me, but I found a job here at this school initially which has a lot of low income families and families that live in public

housing, all the way to very wealthy families. So I started out working here as a family outreach coordinator. In that job my take on it was, well, who's not involved? It's the people in public housing, so we spent several years here doing community organizing in the housing developments in Brookline, trying to mobilize parents and to make a parent organization in the development. It was probably not exactly what they had in mind. That led to creating an organization, which is I what I do now. I direct something called the Steps to Success, a Brookline school community partnership. It's not a grassroots organization, actually, but it works to bring together different elements in this community to level the playing field for low income students and their parents. We do a lot of programming that is intended to help poorer students in Brookline who are slipping through the cracks do well in school and go on to college. We also work with their families in a comprehensive way; that means we work both in schools and in the community. We do a lot of home visiting, we do a lot of out-of –schooltime programming. It's varied work.

What resembles 9 to 5 about it, it's straddled institutions. It has developed as not the school system, not the town, not the housing authority, but some combination of those things. It has the same ups and downs of trying to work to influence institutions while being outside of exact institutional power.

Do you have to do fund-raising for it?

Yeah, we are completely grant funded. We don't do that much grass roots fund-raising since it is not a membership organization, per se. So I am very much using all the skills I used originally working in an organization that is obviously very different, but has elements that remind me of 9 to 5. I have organizer nightmares now where the dream is basically about not doing grass roots organizing. If you can believe that anyone would have nightmares about something like that.

What sort of ideas do you bring into the public housing developments?

Our staff includes people who do home visiting. Their job is to work with parents to try to help them become more active in their kids' education, both as advocates for their children and more knowledgeable participants in the school. The parents that we work with mostly are pretty marginalized in this community. They are a small chunk of the population in Brookline. We act as liaisons between the schools and parents. We try to activate the parents. It can be anything from explaining to them what MCAS is all about (Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment Test), or what special education is about so they can be more empowered to come to school for a parent-teacher conference and not feel lost within it, to teaching them English. We run ESL classes for parents in the community for free.

What we do is say why poorer parents aren't more active in their children's education. It's not because they don't care about their kids. But it might be because of their experiences in their school. It might be because they live in a high-powered, fairly wealthy community, and they don't feel like this is their place as well. Or it might be

because they are working two jobs. Or they don't speak English or have a fairly chaotic family life for one reason or another. So we try to program on all those issues with the idea of making it more possible for people to be active. Then we work a lot with students themselves.

What keeps you going as an organizer? Do you ever get discouraged?

I never get discouraged as an organizer. I could get discouraged about the big picture, but if you are talking about activating people and finding a way that they can feel empowered to have more control over their lives. . . I don't think there is ever a reason to feel discouraged about that. Because it is ultimately what people want. Right now we are going through a difficult time in our nation's history in terms of the direction of the country. But for organizers it comes down to questions of strategy. What shall we do now? In that sense I don't get discouraged. I also feel like I define the meaning of my life through—I don't mean to sound high-faluting about this, and I know it might come out sounding that way—but you know, it is like an edict: change the world. I don't get discouraged about that.

End of interview.