Helen Williams
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Interviewed by Stacey Heath

Tell me a little bit about how you first came in contact with 925.

I first came in contact with them, actually, I lived in Cleveland, and I knew of 9to5 in Boston. I knew Karen Nussbaum, and so I talked with her about how do you start that kind of organization in Cleveland.

And how had you known about them in Boston?

I had lived in Boston.

They were active?

Yes, they had just started when I was in Boston and leaving.

Did they have a big presence?

A beginning presence. I wasn't really active in the organization. I knew it was getting started.

So then you knew Karen and hoped to get one started in Cleveland?

Yes.

Can you tell me a little bit about what that was like?

It was interesting. We started—I'm trying to remember the year. I think it might have been—it was the year of the international women's congress. But I remember borrowing materials from 9to5 in Boston, and there was one or two other women who were interested in working on it and starting it. We started by having just a booth at a kind of convention, a women's convention, that was in the convention center. And women came by and filled out surveys. We had surveys, and then we would pass surveys out in the street. And so after about a month or two, we aggregated the results of the survey and released it to the press. The survey essentially said that women felt—I don't remember the particulars of the questions, but essentially they felt that they were underpaid, that they did see discrimination. And surprisingly, we held a press conference, and the press came and covered it both on TV and in the papers, and then we started holding meetings. And women started coming. We would leaflet, and women would come to evening meetings. And from that we built an organization.

What was similar and what was different about working with 925 than with other organizations or movements?

In a way, the adversary was here. It was something that you could actually do something about. And there were some tools that you could use: legal means, public exposure means, to try and make a difference. That was one thing. The other thing, it was all women, which was great (chuckles). And thirdly, in Cleveland, it was very...I had experience doing organizing in college. And in doing the working women's stuff in Cleveland, it was very diverse. There were older women, younger women, African American women, white women, it really reflected the workforce population of Cleveland, which was I think more diverse than Boston.

Can you say something—you said it was great working with all women—can you say something more about that?

I just think it's a common experience that people have being a woman in our society. There's just almost an inner knowledge you share without saying anything. Which is nice. It's a comfortable kind of feeling.

Did that translate into organizational leadership styles, or patterns of behavior, or anything like that?

I'm not sure. When you're asking that, I'm thinking, well, you're thinking about was it more collegial, softer, yeah, in some ways, yes, but I think there was more conversation and discussion, and exploration. And you know, part of the work really was about consciousness raising. And women reflecting on their situations at work. So that part of it lent itself to kind of a different style too.

Can you think of any stories that are interesting or exciting, challenging stories or reminiscences about working with them?

I can remember two things. One thing was, a group of us went and testified...the federal government was trying to roll back affirmative action. We had collected a lot of testimony and went to Chicago and testified. And watching regular women take a day off and go to Chicago and testify before the federal government and this panel, I just have a picture of that. Another picture I have is sort of the fun side of it. Every year we would do a "pettiest office procedure" contest. The first year we did it, the person who won was the 14 carrot boss, because he required—he was on a diet, and he required his secretary to walk several blocks to go buy him carrots and chop them up. So we went at lunch time and presented this map to the carrot store, and gave him a bunch of carrots to hold him over until he found his way. It got in the Wall Street Journal, it actually got into some newspapers internationally. But the funniest thing is, the wife—it was a law firm—the wife of one of the partners in the law firm I met somewhere else. When she was found out where I was from, she just laughed. She said, "We were so glad (chuckles) you did that."

So that's an image. Another image was really when we filed a suit against a savings and loan company who...equal pay suit. And I remember meeting with the management of the company. The suit was filed in...we filed it with the state regulatory agency. And

just how surprised the management was, that actually they hadn't really thought about that this was going on, and eventually they did give the woman back pay and change their pay practices. So it was actually seeing change right there.

How do you think all of this fit also into the women's movement then?

I think it was a different...I think the issue about economic equity in some way was more mainstream, and could appeal to a greater number of people—women, than some of the kind of the portrayal of the women's movement—I'm not saying it was actually the women's movement, but...so the counterculture, kind of feminism, kind of picture of bra-burners, anti-male, that the media sometimes promoted. I think this was that kind of basic bread and butter issues that just seemed common-sense, fair, when you got down to it. So I think it appealed to a broader base, and may have brought more women into the women's movement.

Do you think the aims of 925 were realized?

I think some of them were. I'm trying to think of the most recent data. But I know that the pay gap has lessened, narrowed. I forget what it was when we started this 20—and part of that is a realization about equal pay, part of it is more women have entered some of the professions. I'm not sure in terms of lower paying, low wage jobs, the whole issue of working poor, that we've made very much of a difference. So I think for middle class, technically skilled, middle class women we may have made more of a difference.

How would you describe the legacy of 925?

I don't think we can go back...I think some of the issues that got raised in that movement, they won't be issues again in quite as blatant a way. There are more subtle iterations of it. But people don't argue about equal pay for equal work anymore. People don't really argue about equal access to promotions. The sort of normal thinking out there, I think, has changed. I also think, and I hadn't really thought about this, but this whole notion about sort of the relevance and contribution of office workers themselves, I think that the sense of that got elevated. And I think that still remains to a certain extent, though the job has changed given technology. Some pieces of it have changed.

And I think there's a whole group of women—I see people a lot here in Cleveland that were part of Cleveland Women Working, 10, 20—20 years ago. And there is this sense that having stood up for yourselves, you've made a difference. A sense of efficacy that I think, for women who experienced it and were part of it, you don't go back. So I think it changed individual women's lives, and I think it did change policy and practice and perception, in the larger scale.

Anything you want to add before we close?

The one thing that I forgot about, the other anecdote that was a huge was the 9 to 5 movie, which was really based on office workers in Cleveland. I just remember the

director coming and Jane Fonda coming and talking to…I remember them calling up and saying, "Look, please get together a group of representative office workers, we want to come talk to them. And one of the things that we want to talk with them about is if they've ever had any fantasies about killing their boss." And I'm sitting there thinking to myself, "Now isn't this like typical Hollywood." (chuckles) Think of sensationalizing… So they get there and they ask the question, and it was—all the fantasies in the movie really came out of these women. And these were not necessarily just young crazy carefree women. A lot of them were 50, 60 years old… (chuckles) So it was wonderful. And the movie, you could really see the women that they interviewed, composites of them, in the movie. And the boss was also a composite of several bosses that the women talked about. So that was kind of a real high point.

Do you think the movie really helped change things?

I think it did. I do. I do think it did.

In what way--what was the value of it?

I think it just raised consciousness about…it was very funny. But it raised consciousness about the plight of women, but also what are some of just the strategies that women use every day in the office to work around their boss. And also how coming together they can make a difference. I can't—everybody who—you hear that song and you just start singing it. (chuckles) So it was great.