ALBERT SHANKER INTERVIEW

QUESTION: Dan Sanders, a very important leader of the AFT, is going to be leaving us. I wonder if you have a few words to say about Dan.

PRESIDENT SHANKER: Well Dan and I go back a long way, thirty-five years in the teacher union movement, starting in Junior High 126 which was one of a handful of schools where there was any union activity. Dan signed me up.

He signed up quite a few other people in the school and we literally spent our lunch hours—we went out for beer and pizza after school. We went to each other's homes just planning, thinking, trying to figure out how to get teachers to join the union and to believe in it.

Dan very soon became the editor of the newspaper which means he wrote everything and went to the printer and pasted up headlines. It was a four-page tabloid. One person put it out and it was Dan.

In those early days every member was promised that the newspaper would be delivered to their homes in an unmarked envelope so that even the postman wouldn't know that they were members of the union.
Dan, however has done about every type of work that you can think of, not just editorial work, but he did organizing. We all know him. In NYSUT, he is the outstanding lobbyist and legislative person. He has organized and conducted strikes. He has gone into places where we had almost no members and got us to be the collective bargaining agent. It is just an unbelievable story in terms of the number of things that Dan has been master at and the contributions that he has made over this very long period of time.

On a personal note, for many years we lived practically next door to each other. We drove to work and back and gave each other ideas, told teacher jokes, argued with each other and spent countless hours in negotiations that sometimes would go for a number of months locked in a negotiating room and sleeping on the floor until the strike or set of negotiations was over.

Dan, of course, has also played a national role going way back to the original voucher notion. There was an attempt to impose it in Rochester, some places in the northeast, and I remember he went out to California to see how it looked there and came back with a report which prevented it from being imposed elsewhere.
And in New York, he was a central figure in the merger of both organizations; on the committee to help bring it together, and of course, helped to make the new organization--not so new anymore--NYSUT the great success that it is today.

QUESTION: Can you tell us about Dan's role in the merger?

PRESIDENT SHANKER: Well, putting an organization together together sounds easy after it is all done, but when you have two separate groups that had almost no contact with each other over the years except for occasional fights over a piece of turf--first, of course, was the problem of developing some understanding, so that both sides would trust each other and Dan was at the center of that.

Then there was the question of how do you get the staffs of both organizations to be willing to support it, and then there was the problem of how do you physically just put two staffs together, two newspapers, two groups of lobbyists and you have duplications. How do you make that work together?

And Dan was really the person who more than anybody else on the AFT side devoted full time to thinking about
it. And the service structure that we have today was largely of Dan's making. Dan's notion was this, and I can remember through all the talks he said this is not going to be a cheap organization to be a member of.

In those days we were paying dues to two national organizations, and state organizations and locals that were running very good operations and had very high dues structures.

He kept saying over and over again in order to make sure that the membership stays in, we have to have a tremendous delivery service. We have to guarantee protection to people, we have to have services that are available to every member, and only if they see those services and see them directly, are they going to remain loyal to the organization.

Many of the things that we take for granted were things that Dan sat at the table and said no matter what it costs that we have got to do it because the members are not going to pay for an organization unless they can visibly see what they are getting.

QUESTION: All right, if we can just for a minute switch gears now, I am going to ask you a few questions for
a video that we are producing to be used for organizing the PSRPs. The whole production is about 15 minutes in length.

We are focusing on why a paraprofession school-related personnel person should join the AFT? What would you say to someone who asked you Why, Al, should I join the AFT as a PSRP?

MR. SHANKER: Well, many PSRPs across the country are not in the AFT and there are many of them who do not have any effective organization fighting for them, and I think the first thing to do is just to compare the kinds of things that we managed to do for those who did come and join us and allowed us to work with them and to help them.

That includes memberships in pension systems where they were denied pensions before. There are places which now have certification where there was no certification. It is places where we managed to put them on annual salary whereas before that they were just hourly workers. There were places where people were always stuck in dead-end and poorly paid jobs where we have negotiated a career ladder where they get time off and they get their college education paid for. We have thousands who started out as
paraprofessionals making $1.75 an hour who are now classroom teachers making $35,000 a year and more. Those are just some of the things.

You do not get those benefits without a good, strong organization, and an organization that believes in not just doing a little better, but really believes in transforming the role of school-related personnel and understanding that in a school, nobody should be a second-class citizen.

QUESTION: You know AFT has been recognized as the ideas' organization. We have been in forefront of the education reform movement, and we now have a vision of how schools in the future might look, "dramatically different" as you called it.

What role or how will the jobs of paraprofessional school-related personnel change in this vision of schools for the future, and why and why is that good for them?

PRESIDENT SHANKER: Well, our schools now don't work very well for most students. They work pretty well for about 20 to 25 per cent of the students. Those are the ones who really learn math and they learn how to read complex materials and they learn how to write effectively, but
80 per cent of the students, even those who remain in school, 75 to 80 per cent, never get up to that skill level and the reason it seems is pretty clear because a lot of youngsters just can't sit still for that period of time that they are required to.

Well, a lot of them can't learn by just listening to somebody else all day long. They might learn if in addition to listening they were able to watch a video tape, listen to an audio tape, do a program on a computer, sit down with an adult in the school and get some individualized instruction, maybe have some peer tutoring with some older youngster, so if you think of the schools of the future as one that gets away from this lecture method which is not effective for 75 or 80 per cent of the kids, and it is a place where the kids can move around and use different ways of learning, then the paraprofessional is no longer the junior assistant helper in the classroom. The paraprofessional really is, at times, a teacher. And so are some older students teachers at sometimes.

And at times you won't need an adult at all. There will be a video cassette. It really turns the entire institution into something that is very, very different
and it is more of a partnership or teamwork type of
operation where different members of a team are at different
bases and playing different roles, and we get away from this
structure that we have got now where the superintendent is
the boss and he dumps on the principal and the principal
turns around and dumps on the teacher, and the teacher
can get angry at the students and sometimes at the para
where the whole thing is top-down and it is more like the
army.

We need something that is more like a hospital
that works well, or a law firm or an architect's firm where
you have got a lot of people doing important work and playing
leadership roles. It is a new kind of school. I think it is
going to be great for teachers. It is going to be great
for school-related personnel.

Mostly it is going to be terrific for kids because
right now kids who could be learning are really sort of shut
out of the whole thing because they are not those few kids who
can learn by listening to a lecture.

QUESTION: It is wonderful. Thank you.