Ellen Bravo
Interviewed by Ann Froines
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Milwaukee, Wisconsin

Ellen, you are aware that I am taping this interview with you over the telephone for the 925 Legacy Project?

Yes.

Ok, great. Thank you for confirming that. Let me start with my first question. Tell me the story about how you entered 9to5.

I will tell you, and I also am going to send you this first chapter of this book I just wrote that's being published in the fall—I mean in the spring, by [Feminist] Press, called Taking On the Big Boys.

Oh great!

That's how I described this [ ]. But anyway, I had heard of 9to5, because my family home is in Cleveland. So some time in the '70s, I had heard about them doing some great actions, you know, like giving a guy a broom for the "Clean Up Your Act" award or something. And I thought, "Who are these people—is this what I've been looking for—a group like this." Then when I moved to Milwaukee, I contacted them, because I wanted to set up a chapter of 9to5. And they at the time they had ten affiliated groups, all of them funded by the national, because they had a federal grant.

This was before the District, the union—this is when it was the Working Women's Association.

Yeah, I think. To be clear, I never worked for the union.

Yeah, I know that about you, Ellen, you're a 9to5...

Right. 9to5.

We called it the District and they called us 9to5. So, yes, it was the Association. And they weren't in a position to take on any new chapters because they didn't have funding to do it. So I moved to Milwaukee, I got a job at the phone company because my husband and I—one of us needed to have a job with health insurance for us to move. I was a really good typist. In addition to getting health insurance, I wanted to learn computers, and I wanted to be a union steward. I had tried to organize a union but I had never been in a union before and I wanted to have that experience. So I took that job—it was just the worst I ever had. I lasted nine months. And then I—

What did you actually do in that work?

I was a word processor. I was in the word processing department. And I always said to myself, someday I'm going to write a novel, I'm gonna have whole scenes from my experience in this place. And I did write a novel but I haven't found a publisher for it yet. It's not about the phone company; it's about the call center of an airline. But there are scenes from my experience on that job, including one where the head guy called everybody in in groups of 20, and you're allowed to ask any question...written anonymously on an easel pad while he leaves the room and...anyway.

Can I just ask you to really speak directly into your phone loudly.

Yes, I'm sorry.

Yeah, no, that's ok. You might be, but it's just to double check.

Ok, no problem. Anyway, I took a short-term job organizing a conference on domestic violence. The national coalition was having a conference in Milwaukee and hired some people to staff it. And my goal was that while I did that I was learning some things about how to write grant proposals, and start a group like 9to5. That's what I wanted to do. And then I found out that 9to5 was having their annual summer school for working women. It was called at the time, their leadership conference at Bryn Mawr. And I found somebody to go with me, and we drove 18 hours to this conference in July of that year of '82. It was 1982. And I walked in and I thought, "Oh, my God, this is a coming home." I had been waiting for this—this was '82—since the late '60s. And all that time I had been working for a group that was multiracial and working class. And here was this group... And all of those [issues] that I was living, because by that time I had two small children, and had run into all kinds of work-family issues with the phone company, and pay equity had been a big concern of mine since I'd been doing office work, which I'll tell you more about when—anyway, and they had a sense of humor, they were fun! And there were all these women speaking, on panels, or workshops, who I could tell they were doing it for the first time, but they did it well. And I thought, "Ok, this is a group that cares about leadership development and not just having stars." And I put on a name tag that said, "Ellen Bravo, soon-to-be Milwaukee chapter." Because the other thing that had happened, is that they'd lost the federal grant. That was the bad news. But the good news was that they were looking to have volunteer chapters. I think their view at the time was that you would just function without staff. But my view was that I'd raise money, and that we'd do our own fundraising and have staff. And I went back and found a group of people and we started a chapter in December of that year.

When you came out of college, Ellen—I assume that you did go to college—did you start out trying to be an organizer, or did you have some work experience?

I had a whole other life. I was a classical scholar, I studied Greek and Latin literature. I'm an ABD [All But Dissertation]—I almost finished a PhD. But I had gotten political while I was at college. It was in the mid '60s, and the civil rights movement, and then the anti-Vietnam war movement. And then I married a Greek guy, and there was a coup in Greece in 1967. He had just left the country—left Greece—at the time, and couldn't go back, because he had spoken out about it. We got married, we lived in Montreal, we were very active in this anti-Greek dictatorship movement. And during that time, I was still doing my graduate work, and realizing I just couldn't do this field anymore. It was just too small and elite and I needed to be doing something that was more involved with social change. So he and I went—he got a job teaching at St. Mary's College in southern Maryland in 1970. Off the record, I think you and I met sometime during that early '70s.

I think so, yes.

I don't remember in what context, but I think I was still with him. And you were in Chicago, maybe? Were you in Chicago?

My then husband was one of the Chicago 7, so maybe that's what happened. I hardly remember anybody I met quickly during that period, needless to say.

I can imagine.

I feel like I know you because I'm very good friends with both Karen Nussbaum and Ellen Cassedy and I know you wrote the book with Ellen.

Exactly. Anyway, they let me teach women's studies, as a boon to get him to come. They said—I didn't mean boon, I meant bone—as a bone to get him to come, they said they'd let me teach.

This is at University of Maryland?

No, it's not the University of Maryland, it was called St. Mary's College. It was a state school in southern Maryland. And I was just making it up—it was a brand new field at the time. And my students would come to me and say, "Ok. We're ready to change the world. You've really opened our eyes. Where should we go?" "I have no idea. I guess I better go with you and figure it out." He and I then moved to Baltimore because he wanted to be in a city that had a Greek community. This was 1973, fall of '73. And shortly after we moved there, we split up. And so I had to get a job. I was on my own, and even though we didn't have kids, I obviously had to have some way to support myself. And so I thought, "Well, I'm going to get a office job." I knew a lot of guys who were organizers who would get painting jobs or construction jobs for a few months, make enough money and then go back to organizing. Maybe I would do some work in the community, in this neighborhood I lived in. And there was a group called the Baltimore Women's Union. Anyway, I got this job at a hospital in the EKG department—this was before you had to have any special training to do EKGs—they taught you on the job. But mainly I got hired for my clerical abilities. And because I was the only person who could understand the doctor who happened to be Greek (chuckles). And I made so little money that I could never leave the job, even though I was disciplining myself. And I thought, "Wait a minute, this isn't right, these women are smart and skilled, and why do we make so little money," so that issue had been important to me [from that time].

Aside from making such a low wage, did you observe other kinds of, you know, lack of respect toward women office workers at that period?

Exactly. Which is why raises, rights, and respect appealed to me so much when I first heard about 9to5. Sure. Being completely invisible even though—actually the first job I got was as a nurse's aide. And I remember how we were told over and over—"You are the front line. You are the ones that the patient . . . if something happens, you will notice it first. So you are really important." And we were. We did notice things first. But we got paid poverty wages. It was outrageous. So, all those issues. And the work-family thing I wasn't as aware of until I had kids, but I certainly knew other people who were dealing with them and...

It sounds like you're saying you were somewhat of a feminist at the time you encountered 9to5.

I was a feminist. I had been in the women's movement. But what I was looking for—so back to when I was in Montreal which is where I found the women's movement—and it was great for me. You know, I was the only woman and the only non-Greek in these Greek meetings I went to. And I had this completely schizophrenic life. So I was Ellen [name?] in the Greek [world] at McGill, which is where I was staying, because I had taken my husband's name, because that's what you did. I was Eleni [name] in the Greek movement. And then someone invited me to this women's group, and I decided to go as Ellen Bravo. I don't even remember if I thought about it, I just sort of did it. And it just opened my eyes to all these things that had happened in my life. And I thought, well, this is great. But I couldn't take any of the Greek women that I worked with in the community—I couldn't take them to these meetings. But the issue—the key issue for them was abortion rights. And even though I supported abortion rights, I felt probably that the Greek women I worked with were . . . that wasn't their issue. Their issue was feeding their children. They'd come over to Canada, they'd get their husband's name and they would get these factory jobs; they'd buy furniture on credit or from one of those rent-to-own places; then their husband would lose the job and they'd be in huge trouble; these were men who also couldn't go back to Greece because of political involvement. And I wanted a group that would talk—but they also had issues in their marriages, obviously, and there was a big issue that I was the only woman in the meetings. . . There were other women involved in the Greek movement, but they did bake sales and raffles and they never went to meetings.

Did that ever come up in the meetings, that you were the only woman, or--?

When I first started, I was grateful to be let in. And then it started to really bother me. And it was only because my husband was a professor and everybody else were workers. They looked up to him, and so if he wanted his wife to come, they weren't going to...

[they didn't care] about it. So, you know, [those cross] issues where everything was all connected.

Anyway, so I left the women's movement—it was so middle class and so white, and I needed something else. And I kept looking for it. And then when I was in St. Mary's, I was doing work in welfare rights. Because I knew someone, the mother of one of my students, and got involved with her and then got involved with [ ]

Was this back in NWRO days, with National Welfare Rights—

In Maryland, in 1971, I don't think there was an organized group.

Oh, you weren't part of a national, ok.

[It] was just doing literally stuff about the horrendous humiliating treatment of women on welfare. And I was going every weekend, as often as I could, to D.C. to see these women in the women's movement that I had met when I first got there. When I first got there, I hadn't lived in the States essentially for four years. I knew there was a women's movement but I didn't really know anyone. And so I thought, ok, on August 26th, something will be happening in D.C., I'm just going to go and find the women's movement and... And sure enough, I did. But of course everyone was very suspicious of me, because who was I, that I didn't know anyone. They were having a march to a women's prison. It was just such a typical thing. We get to the women's prison, and the women yell out the window, "Free us, free us," and everyone looks around and thinks—you know, they had no clue what to do to meet the needs of these women. And people were chanting the slogan, "Victory to the Vietcong." So I went up to someone who looked like one of the leaders and said, "You know, that really is an imperialist term, you should be saying 'Victory to the NLF.'" So that made everyone *very* suspicious of me. Who *was* this person? (Laughs.))

That was a good message for the women in prison.

That was really very...you know. What can you say? So anyway, I would go to these—visit these women I met, and their whole thing was struggling internally in their own house. And I thought, "Well, I can't bring this friend of mine who's on welfare here. This doesn't speak at all to what she needs. They're not doing any work outside of their own battles ." So I really had been looking for a multi-racial and [inaudible].

What made you move to move to Milwaukee in particular?

I re-married, which is a whole other...

Oh, ok.

After my first husband and I split up, and I was doing this job in the hospital, I got involved in a group called "Dump Nixon Coalition." Remember there were several groups at the time to impeach Nixon. And I met my husband, Larry Miller, who was a steelworker. And he is a Wisconsin lad, and so we actually lived other places. We lived in Chicago first.

So it was basically personal factors that...ended

His mother had died very suddenly, and she was only 55. And his father was really in a bad situation and we wanted to be close to him. His family lived in little towns in Wisconsin. They thought Chicago—they think Milwaukee is a big city and so Chicago is a scary one—the traffic scared them...so we just wanted to be closer.

Let me go back a little bit. Growing up, Ellen, did you have any knowledge or opinions on labor unions or workplace struggles?

No. I was from a...the way I describe it is, I lived on the wrong of the rapid transit tracks in Cleveland. We lived in this very wealthy suburb but we were in the [six blocks], that were referred to as the rectum of that (chuckles)

As the what?

The rectum of—

Oh my gosh.

And literally I lived two houses from the dividing line, for Cleveland from the suburb. And so I had a certain...I didn't have class envy, I had...I didn't want to be part of the world I saw around me. I wanted to—and that's why I became a classical scholar. I wanted to escape the rude, crude material [ ]. And obviously it didn't take long to figure out that the university was just like the rest of the [world], for all its politics and greed and... And so, I got attracted to the idea of protest politics, early, when I was at Cornell. But I didn't really know people in unions.

Interestingly, my mother was a social worker, who went back to work when we were in—I have a twin sister and an older brother—when my sister and I were in junior high, so that we could go to college, [late in life], so we three kids could go to college. And my father, who was in sales, was in an accident. Had a car accident. And it turned out the reason he had the car accident was because he had cataracts and had been driving blind for who knows how long. But he knew the city so well, he [drove] until he ran into a parked truck. So he was essentially out of work for a year. Because he had to recover from his injuries in the car crash, and then—it used to be a big deal, cataracts, remember each eye had to be developed to a certain level before they could operate on it. And he didn't have income. He was in that kind of sales job where you made money if you worked and you didn't if you didn't. So all of a sudden, my mother's little salary was our only income.

And she was in a union. Which the first time it made sense to me that she was in a union was the summer of '66. I had graduated college, I was working against the war. And she was against the war in Vietnam before I even thought about it. So I wanted her to come to this big demonstration we were having. We were coordinating all these demonstrations. Ours was part of a coordinated set of demonstrations on August 6th on the anniversary of Hiroshima. And Stokely Carmichael was coming, and it was going to be a big deal, and I wanted her to come and she was afraid for her job. And I said, "Mom, what does it mean to you that you are living in a country where you have to worry about your job, and you think—you know, we have freedom of speech." She surprised me and just showed up. But later she said to me that she realized she had a union. And first of all that she shouldn't have to be afraid. But also that she'd have some protection. So it was the first time I really thought about what did that mean.

Tell me some stories about those early days, then, with the Association, trying to work with that volunteer group in Milwaukee.

Oh, it was great. It was hard to raise the money, and so I worked as a paralegal for—I worked as a temp. When the domestic violence conference was over, I worked as a temp. And volunteered one day a week for 9to5. And then we raised a little money and I was the staff one day—paid one day a week, and worked as a paralegal four days a week, doing pro se divorces. And then we finally raised enough money that I think I was half-time, and—

Were you raising this money locally?

Yes, we were just raising it in Wisconsin. And then eventually, I started also working half-time for the national organization doing regional organizing for 9to5. And eventually locally we raised enough money to have a part-time office staff, and then other program staff. So, we started in '82. The pay equity fight in Wisconsin was in '84. And that was really how our chapter grew. We got very involved in the pay equity fight. We had women who were not—pay equity was only for state workers. But what we did was we helped . . . they were really trying to create a wedge between state workers and working women in the private sector by saying, "This isn't going to help you," and "They'll just make more money and they're already making too much money." And our members said, "We need the state to set a model for our employers. And told stories of how their work was under[going]— And we just—you know, we did a lot of work in a number of ways around it. It was very exciting, and we [built a force?] of these low wage workers. And after a while, the building our office was in had a clerical training program for women moving off welfare. We shared a bathroom with that floor. We got to know a lot of those women, and we got to know the instructors. And what we realized was happening is, they had this terrific training and really good support network, until they graduated and got hired. And then, a lot of them would lose their jobs because they'd get sexually harassed and didn't know what to do, or they'd make a mistake and figure they were going to get fired so they'd just not go back, or they'd get in conflict with [someone]. So we had this conference about what shall we do about this, and we decided to design this program. But in the conversation, it turned out that a lot of the women on our board had either been on welfare or knew someone on welfare, a family member. And what we realized is this dividing line between women on welfare and quote working women was very thin and this was a perfectly appropriate thing for us to do. And so our chapter started this project that got funded and we then helped replicate it in other cities. And it really changed 9to5. It helped bring in women on welfare—or bring awareness, as I said, to 9to5 members, many of them had been on welfare anyway.

So was that part of why—wasn't originally 9to5 the National Association of Office Workers, and then it became Working Women?

Yeah, Working Women as soon as the movie came out. All the groups had different names. Some were like Cleveland Working Women, I think. So they decided they'd all adopt the name 9to5 and then made it National Association of Working Women. [Funders had also]--amalgamate and have the same names and work together for funding. But what changed, in the late '80s, was seeing it as being more than clerical workers. Both expanding it to include poverty issues and welfare [explicitly], and then also there were in the '90s more...like there was a chapter in LA that was Women in Transit. So there were women in other kinds of jobs, who also became part of 9to5. So we saw it more as an organization of low-wage workers, or women in—that the mission statement I think said, women in low-wage jobs—in predominantly female jobs...or women who'd experienced discrimination .

What would you say was in the history of 9to5, the highpoint of that organization nationally? Because I know you became a national leader of that organization, right?

Right. When Karen [Nussbaum] left. When Karen went to the Women's Bureau. Although at that time, we made a bunch of changes. It was one of those things...it was the kind of transition where just because it's a transition, it's a good time to look at everything and make some changes. And it wasn't so much a critique of the way things had developed, but it was a sort of intentional effort to make the leadership more collaborative and to make it more multiracial. This had been a big weakness of 9to5. So I was the director but we had a management team. And we started a more collaborative directorate. After a while, I had a co-director, in [ ] as co-directors.

I would say the highpoint—it's hard to say. There were a lot of things that we did that we were really proud of. Bur probably the work around family leave. Because we really—we helped bring family leave in a number of states, and then we—*we* really helped make a difference in winning it nationally because there was...the group that was... coordinating it was a D.C.—one of the beltway groups, and they did great work, but they had no grassroots base. We really helped give faces to the problems, to the specifics, and make it much more of a grassroots effort, and build alliances that were I think good models for how to have partners, for example, among elder groups and groups that were working in communities of color, groups concerned with children, and poverty, anti-poverty groups. And faith-based groups who were progressive.

What was your take on the strategy of having 9to5 as the National Association of Working Women, [develop] alongside the effort to develop District 925 as a union?

[It felt/we thought it was] great. One of the things that I liked about the organization when I met them, because that had already happened, I liked...we never had District 925 in Milwaukee, but we did, whenever we could, refer people to the AFL who would send them to an appropriate union. We did a lot of work together nationally, 9to5 and District 925, we did work together on part-time and temp work; we did work together on family leave, we did work together on VDT health and safety, computer health and safety. And we loved that partnership. So we knew people...Karen as you know straddled the two groups. I didn't do that. When she left, there was a conscious decision that there'd be other people promoted in District 925 to be the head of it, and that 9to5 would have separate leadership. But we still had bonds and worked together and talked to each other a lot and stuff. And so we always felt that collective bargaining was essential. But we also knew that there were many women who couldn't—it was interesting, the first 9to5 leadership conference I went to, I remember Ellen Cassedy speaking and saying: when District 925 started, most people including her, thought 9to5 would stop existing. That everybody would just unionize. And they realized that wasn't going to happen, that there were going to always be women in non-union jobs who needed a way to build power and have a voice. And that there was public policy work that was really important to do, that 9to5 could do. And also that there were some workplace initiatives that could be done, with the help of some kind of organizational vehicle that wasn't collective bargaining. It wasn't as good, there was no guarantee it would last, but there were struggles, just as 9to5 had struggled before it had a union side, to get workplace change. It could continue to do that. And it could also help point to this partnership with labor and help spread awareness, in a way that a union has much more difficulty doing. For a non-union group to be able to talk about the value of unionization, we had a certain credibility and legitimacy that helped.

I imagine it was a way of keeping women's issues kind of in the forefront for—

Well, and then that was the other side. That 9to5 made a big mark on District 925 which made a mark on the labor movement. And one of the things that 9to5 did, still does, is that it acts as a bridge between the women's movement and the labor movement. So we were always—all of our coalitions, labor was a key partner. And that was new for a lot of women's organizations. They hadn't done that before. So in the same way that we tried to be a bridge between poverty groups and women's groups, effecting change in both of those---

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SIDE B BEGINS

Ok, you were speaking about it being a bridge.

Yeah, and I think the bridge work we did with the labor movement helped us do that same thing in other settings, like building ties between anti-poverty groups and women's groups.

Yeah. I'd like to talk a little bit now about women's leadership. You mentioned how you went to one of those first summer schools—

Right.

Can you describe and remember some of the details of the training you received?

I can, because we continued to do it, and still do. Even though it stopped being at Bryn Mawr pretty quickly (chuckles) because it was just hard, you know, to get people there even though the tradition was nice, of the old working women's [school?].

Right.

It was a combination of nitty-gritty skills building—how to work with the media, how to work with legislators, how to do public speaking; more strategic thinking; and popular education. We would do workshops on things like why women's pay is so low and what to do about it, or...these poverty issues and what to do about it. And then there would also be relationship building. 9to5 had caucuses—still has caucuses, like women of color; lesbian and bisexual women; poverty. And what I saw happen—I remember the summer school where we tried to get people to see why 9to5 as an organization should embrace the issue of welfare reform—oh, I don't want to call it welfare reform—of welfare rights, and poverty. And there were a group of women who had come from a university chapter, who were describing the threat to their jobs, that the university was replacing them with temp workers who were in fact welfare-to-work participants. And they were really angry at this. And when we first started talking about welfare, they didn't get why would we take this up. And then they realized, of course, that they had a lot in common with the women who were going to be pushed into these jobs. And that their anger should be at the university administration. They needed to build this partnership. And part of the reason they did that, part of the reason they came to that understanding, was the women they met at that leadership conference who were welfare activists, from Milwaukee or Atlanta or Cleveland—by then I think they also had this project in Cleveland. And it was so wonderful watching this. And I saw the same thing happen on the issue of gay rights. I saw women who literally had become friends with people who—and realized "Oh, you're a lesbian, I just never thought about these issues before, or I just kind of blindly accepted a certain bias, and now it isn't any more an abstract issue to me, it's so-and-so, my friend." So, and the same thing on the issue of race. People who had not had experience before in a multiracial friendships, understood in a totally different way why it was not enough to just not be a racist; that they actually had to fight racism. So that was always a really essential part of those [initial] groups—that relationship building, as well as the nitty-gritty skills and analytical skills. You'd have speakers who'd inspire or help; people would learn from each other's successes or problems; all those things were part [of it].

What is the status today of 9to5 as a national organization?

They're vibrant. The funding has always been such a big issue. It's the only part of my job I didn't like. And I have to say, it wasn't raising money that I didn't like so much as worrying about it. I hate it. And you know, the pay was always a big problem. We never had very high pay. I didn't have a pension, until maybe, I don't know, the mid-90s, we didn't have any kind of retirement thing, and then we did a 401k kind of program.

The national office is in Milwaukee, right?

It is. Although the national director is in Denver. So really it's always been, since we had this more cooperative form, these several offices work closely together and a lot of work happens by email and over the phone. It's just not the distinction of the national office in the same way that there was [ ]. There always were the leaders in other cities as well.

So, do you still have a chapter structure?

Yes. I'm so sorry, can you hold one second?

Sure. No problem.

Hello?

Yes.

We actually still have a chapter structure. But the point was, they had to cut back some, and now they've gotten some more funding and they're re-staffing, and that's good. And they also specifically got some money to raise wages, to raise pay, which is great.

For staff.

Yes.

How many staff are there in 9to5 now?

I don't know. I'd say probably...16 to 18? I don't know literally because they just hired some new staff.

Just to have a rough idea. And most of the funding for the organization then is [done] very centrally, nationally?

It's a combination. They raise funds in each of the offices, because it's four offices: Atlanta, Milwaukee, Denver, and San Jose. Each of those offices raises money in their own state, for work they do in their state. And then there's money that's raised nationally that's spread among all of them.

That seems to be one of the successful achievements, of 9to5, to combine that national structure with—

Yes.

--a good base locally. Because I used to teach about, when I was in women's studies, the women's movement. And I saw so many organizations foundering, over the years. . .

It was again one of the things we liked best about the organization, that it had this national/local, so that it always had grassroots work going, organizing going on, but it also helped people see that they were part of this national movement. And so when people met each other from other cities and states, that was always a great experience.

Ellen, have you taken time in recent years to reflect on your own development as a leader through this organization?

I just want to tell you one story, though, about the fundraising.

Ok, please do.

I remember one time when Karen was coming—this was early years, '83 or '84--to Milwaukee and Chicago, to District 925 in Chicago. And I called Andrea Gundersen and said, "Andrea, what kind of fundraiser are you doing when Karen comes?" And she said, "Fundraiser—what are you talking about. We don't do fundraisers. We're just having a dinner, inviting all our members, and feeding them." And I thought, ok, now I understand the difference between the union movement and the non-profit world. Because the idea that Karen would come and we wouldn't do a fundraiser, you know, is just unthinkable. Of course you would take advantage of the opportunity. (Laughs.)

So in terms of my own development—isn't that an interesting question…it's everything. It gave me an opportunity to…I got to do so many things I wouldn't have done otherwise. But it also I think the most valuable part of my development in 9to5 was learning how being a leader meant inspiring others to see their own leadership, and then to refine and develop it. Really understand that leadership is...I sometimes dislike the way people talk about making leaders, as if people are these blank slates. Because so many of the women, of course, who are leaders of 9to5 are women with nothing, with no formal education or financial resources. But they're smart in so many ways, and they're already leaders. And I really feel like one of the things we do is help them see that about themselves, and then figure out how to use it in a more disciplined and organized way, by being part of this structure. One of the things I love best about 9to5 was when people would get . . . We'd get people together in a room and they'd read each other the testimony they were planning—or they'd just tell each other their stories. And people would say, “Wow, that’s so great, put that first. And don’t go on and on about such and such, just talk about that. That’s what was really powerful.” So they would really help each other decide how to present what they wanted to say in the most effective way, and learning how to do that better, how to help people go through that process, I’d say was the most important leadership development for me.

And then there were lots of other things. Being able to debate assholes on the other side, and to whomp them . . . And then learning how to help other people learn how to do that.

Do you believe that there are specific women’s ways of organizing?

I don’t believe that it’s inherently—I tend to think if we got rid of gender stereotypes, it’s hard to say what feminine would be and what masculine would be. But I do think in terms of socialization that there are women’s ways, and that they are more collaborative and more...resistant to—not that I don’t know many women who are very hierarchical—

Right. Responding to the structures they’re working in.

Yeah, exactly. But...or liking to have that kind of power. But I think it’s the idea that you’d be...well, two things in particular I think about 9to5, but also many other women’s groups. One is, because of our lives and the role that we play outside of work, we were much more. . . obviously as a group like 9to5 will fight for work/family issues, the necessity of walking our talk, and making it possible for women with kids to be leaders, was really important. And it’s so inspiring when you think about who the leaders were at District 925 as well as at 9to5 the association. That was always true. These were not women who said, “I will sacrifice my personal life for my organizing,” but who saw ways to integrate that. And who fought for having a structure that allowed it. Allowed you to have a job and a life was always a hard thing. And one of the things that was pointed out about the labor movement is that the kind of change women and people of color need are exactly what the labor movement itself needs. I feel that way about grassroots organizations in general whether they’re in the labor movement or not. That we had to make it possible for our members [ ] who want to be active, to see that you could do that without having to ruin your life. If our only model was the maniacs who had no life outside of it, we would never have gotten these women involved. And if we hadn’t gotten them involved, we wouldn’t have been able to do the work we did. So, I always felt that it’s integrally connected, that our success at making it possible for our own staff to have lives outside of work was also the reason we were good at getting women involved. We always learned...I mean, we worked full [inaudible], and [mostly/I want to say] we always did it well. But we still tried to find ways for members to be involved at whatever level they could. And always having degrees of things that you could do [inaudible]

I know a couple of the people I’ve interviewed who made the transition to—who tried to make the transition from 9to5 the association to the District, felt that in the union movement it’s a little harder sometimes to combine it [work/family], because of the evening meetings demands, and some of the organizing demands.

Right.

And they actually moved on to other organizations because of that.

No, I mean so many of the staff we have at 9to5 came from the union movement, because they couldn't [handle the hours…]

How interesting.

One woman who had the child who's mildly autistic, and another who just wanted time with her kid, not because he had difficulty but just because she wanted to be with him. And he was by then a teenager. And they just, they said, "We just can't do these hours anymore." And one of them is the person who is now the director. She said—this is I think off the record because I don't know if she'd want this to be public—but she had a health problem. I think she had surgery and when she came back, said, "Well, you know, I'm going to need to have regular 40-hour weeks, the doctor said, for a while." And the [union] guy said, "Oh, of course. For a week or two. But then, you gotta go back to your own schedule." I mean, he just didn't have a clue. He didn't have a clue. And she just said, "I can't do this anymore." And we had come to Denver—they were starting an office in Denver—we came to her—she worked in SEIU—to get ideas for someone to hire, and she thought, "Well, maybe I should do that job."

Even though you weren't in 925, I'd like to ask you a couple of questions on your opinion about it.

I just want to say one other thing, by the way, about 9to5 from myself. I obviously got the opportunity to…let's see. I got the opportunity to do sexual harassment training. This was something I developed in Milwaukee because a friend of mine who was a bus driver was being sexually harassed and she didn't want to report him, [ ], but she sure the hell wanted it to stop, and asked me to come and work with the Local. And because of that we developed the sexual harassment training, that we then kept doing and refining and doing a lot more of it. Because of that experience and because of the 9to5 hotline, when the Anita Hill stuff happened, we got a lot of publicity. And because of that, we got asked to write that book, [ ]. And because I got asked to do that book, three years later that publisher asked me to do a book on work and families. So I feel like I had opportunities to write, and I had to do them quickly—the sexual harassment book-- Ellen and I wrote that book in two months.

Yeah. You mean to take advantage of the historical moment?

Yes, exactly. And obviously that made it easier for me to have a certain…recognition, so that now when I'm writing this book, having that background still

Is the new book you're about to publish a work and family?

It's called "Taking on the Big Boys, or Why Feminism is Good for Families, Businesses and the Nation." It's a popular book about social justice feminism, mainly economic justice issues.

Great. You've sort of anticipated a couple of my questions.

Ok, I know I [ ]

Which is great. I'm happy with that. But I do want to make time in this interview for your thoughts on whether the aims of 925, the District, were realized. And any thoughts you have about the links between 9to5 and 925.

I really don't feel like I can comment on whether their goals were realized, because there are so many factors that I wasn't privy to about what was going on in SEIU, and the amalgamation, and all those trends, and what pushed [them] away from having a office workers' division, and so on. So I don't really want to comment on that. I do think they made an enormous impact on the labor movement. I know it, I saw it. And I feel like that they weren't the only group that did. But that they really exemplified a model of women's leadership and organizing. I remember, when they decided to make this alliance with SEIU, one of the reasons they did is that SEIU allowed—said, "You can continue the autonomy you have in the way you organize." And of course for them organizing always had to do with building a committee and a building local leadership. So it was a model not just about organizing women but about organizing, I think, particularly low wage workers and immigrant workers, that the labor movement really needed to adopt. I think they were a big part of SEIU's emphasis on moving to organizing low wage workers, and had more emphasis on women and people of color. So that's really I think all I can say. I don't know, I don't really know in terms of what they set as their goals. Was it the right thing, when they decided that they thought it was a good thing to dissolve District 925 and merge it into SEIU—it was hard for me to say that that was a good thing. But I didn't have a...we had stopped having as much connection with them in the last years of District 925.

Ok. Let me ask you, what is your position now with the Association?

I'm a consultant, and the specific thing I do—I do two things. I coordinate an 8-state consortium of state coalitions working on paid leave. It has the awkward name of Multi-State Working Families Consortium, hopefully soon to be changed. The group is working on developing a brand, some kind of umbrella slogan like "Time to Care" or something like that. And I hope when it does, the consortium will take that name. Anyway, I do that. And then I also do some speaking and training.

For the organization.

For the organization. So for example, sometimes if they get sexual harassment training requests, I'll do them or, if I get asked to do speaking at this moment, I do it to raise money for 9to5 and then they pay me a consultant fee.

So I'm getting a very strong message that 9to5 is working a lot in coalition with other organizations

Oh, sure.

On these broader...

Oh, yeah.

Issues affecting workers, and particularly women workers. Both labor and women's organizations.

Exactly. It always has. Since I've been involved with it, it always has, but we didn't start that. It was part of the SEIU... the District 925, 9to5 connection, the SEIU connection meant that we were always...we had this partnership for example on the VDT [video display terminal] campaign. It reminds of this...we once did a phone-a-thon to raise money, and we were calling people who had called us because they had some problem working on their VDT, and phone-caller named Mary was calling this guy, and said, "Is so-and-so there?" And his wife said, "Who's this?" And she said, "I'm Mary. Your husband filled out a VDT survey for us." And we could all hear this voice in the background saying, "VD survey, what do you *mean* VD survey!" And the guy gets on the phone, he says, "I understand you want some money, I'll make a contribution, I can't talk right now." So we used to have a workshop we gave called "VDT is not a social disease but it may be hazardous to your health." That was developed [then]. Anyway, that campaign, which started as a partnership between SEIU and 9to5, obviously brought in a lot of other partners as well. So, it wasn't a...it was always a model of things that [ ]

How would say labor leaders, many of whom were men, view the Association? Because I remember early stories about how the labor movement didn't really take the Association seriously, because it wasn't organizing for collective bargaining.

Exactly. I'd say, in the cities where we are, we have very close ties and lots of respect from the local labor leaders. So in Denver, for example, I mean Linda came from the labor movement. They already had respect for her. She always made labor a key partner. In Milwaukee, they've always been progressive people as the head of the CLC [Central Labor Council] on the state side. We never had trouble working with them. And Atlanta the same thing. So I feel like just because of good work on the grassroots level, that was never a problem. At the national level, obviously, since once Sweeney became head of the AFL, he always had a lot of regard for Karen, and asked her to come over there right when he first came in. So they, I think, always had respect for 9to5 the association. So I never felt that kind of problem. We obviously had some problems with certain individuals who were labor leaders, but I don't think 9to5 the association ever felt "dissed" by the union movement.

Ellen, are you also teaching? I noticed you have an edu address.

Yes. I teach women's studies at University of Wisconsin right now. I have a 75% appointment. I have sort of this perfect situation right now. I have a 75% appointment which means I'm in the pension fund—I mean, I won't make very much money but—(chuckles)

How long have you been there?

This is my third year.

I had an .833 appointment at UMass Boston for 28 years, so it can be done.

No, it's great, because it means I teach six classes and that's it. I don't have to do any other stuff. So it's compact.

Oh, so you don't even have to go do service, and—

No. I don't have to do any other stuff. I mean, the work I do in the general movement community, I fill it in for my...but I'm not required to do anything else. And then I wanted time to write. I wanted to write this book. And I also wanted to write a novel. I wrote a novel. I wanted to finish it and get it published somewhere, and then keep writing . . .

So do you see yourself more now as a sort of activist/intellectual/writer than organizer, or how do you put all these things together?

The one word I would never use about myself is academic. Somebody said that to me: "Now that you're in the academy"—and I said, "Oh, don't say that word!" I never say "the academy," it's so pretentious, why do people—and also, who knows what that means in the real world? I always see myself as an organizer. I see writing this book as...for me, going on a book tour is an organizing opportunity. I love the idea of talking to women...you know, I know a lot of writers really hate that, dread the book tour kind of thing. But I just...I can't wait. [ ] My experience in the past when we did the other two books—I did book tours, and I loved it. I may not love the travel part, but I love the meeting women.

I used to say activist educator or educator activist. That's kind of how I would talk about myself.

What are you doing now, that you're not--?

I took early retirement, for kind of personal reasons, health problems in my family and also I'd done teaching so many years, I thought about doing some other things. As it ended up, I'm down here away from Boston now and living in Connecticut to be near my daughter and two granddaughters. I'm working part-time on this

project right now and spending a fair amount of time with the little kids. It's a nice combination. I'm a couple years older than you; I'm definitely a slightly earlier generation than most of the women I've been interviewing for this project.

I think I'll ask this final question about whether you feel optimistic about the organizing that 9to5 is doing now?

I do feel optimistic. I feel like for the first time— a lot of 9to5 work right now is around paid sick days and other work/family issues. They work on the good jobs issue, community benefits, and they've really tried to get people in the good jobs movement to understand that a good job isn't just a living wage and benefits but also flexibility for family care. And for the first time, I feel like some national political leaders are realizing that they have to start talking about this, in a conscious way...in their campaigns. It's been so hard trying to break through—I mean, I've had these conversations with—do you know who Bill Galston is? He teaches at University of Maryland. And he was an advisor to Gore. And I wound up at some conference with him. It turned out I knew him from Cornell. You know how sometimes someone looks at you across the room, and you realize that they look at you like you know them but you have no idea who they are? That was this situation. I had no idea...I said, "Bill,"—this was in October—in November [2000 in Los Angeles]—"You've got to get Gore to say FMLA [Family and Medical Leave Act]. This is Clinton's signature victory." It's the main issue people come up to thank him for in airports—I'm telling you this will make the difference." And I had just had this experience—my Mom was in assisted living and had been hospitalized so had to go to this nursing care unit before she could go back to assisted living. And I met five different people there, who had either just had maternity leave or had been off because they had a sick parent, or were talking about my being with my mother. And every single one of them did not know that it was because of the FMLA that they were able to take that leave, and didn't know that Bush's Daddy had vetoed it twice, and that Gore and Clinton were the ones who passed it. And each of them had said, "I wasn't going to vote, but now I am." And I know it's a very small sample but (chuckles), it seemed to me completely typical of all these undecided whether to vote, not undecided who to vote for, but undecided whether it mattered. And Galston looked at me and said, "We've done the polling and it doesn't poll high. We're not going to talk about it." And I said, "You idiot! What polls are you talking about?" The AFL, you know, had done that poll, working women's poll, and it was the number one or two issue, and this Democrat/Republican pollster had done this women's voices poll and again it was the number one or two issue. I said, "Who are you listening to!" Anyway, I feel like that's been the experience with Kerry. We tried and tried. There was a work/family little...tea. And tried and tried to get him to talk about it publicly and explicitly make this a distinction between him and Bush. Couldn't do it! He wouldn't do it. They wouldn't do it, his people. And I really feel like that's shifting. And I say that only because it's a measure, I think, of the vitality of these issues and the way they're starting to gain some traction. Paid sick days is a really exciting thing because it's a new labor standard and it specifically takes on corporations, and there are a lot of politicians who don't want to touch it for that reason. You know, FMLA you can always encourage—it's unpaid, and you can encourage voluntary action, but this is really about requiring it, making a mandate. So I feel optimistic because of this direction and I feel optimistic that [tape off/ on] either change their own practice or move out of the way, and make room for some of these other leaders to come up. So I thought that's another thing that's giving me hope.

Tiny example of this is I've gone to a couple of these marches in New York City in the last year against the [Iraq]war, and I've been so pleased to see how prominent NOW [National Organization of Women] is in these marches. Young women from NOW, linking war...actually they don't even try to make the link. They're just against the war. You know, I don't remember that from earlier antiwar stuff, so much. Where all the other organizations would kind of...I mean, civil rights organizations were there, but the women's organizations now seem more integrated into some of the other movements.

Yeah. One of the things that this new women's movement talks about is making social justice feminism more central in the women's movement, but also challenging social justice movements to make gender more central. So I think it will be exciting if it moves beyond the retreat level into the country [outside].

Ok. A final question, Ellen. Is there anything else you would like to add that I haven't asked about that's relevant for your story of 9to5?

No, but if I think of something I'll email you.

Ok. You will have a chance to review your transcript. So you can even add a paragraph or two if you see something that you'd really like to add.

Ok! Thanks for your work on this, Ann.

You're welcome. I look forward to tracking down your book when it's out.

Ok, great. Thanks so much.

Bye bye.

END OF INTERVIEW