Bonnie Ladin
Interviewed by Ann Froines
Washington D.C.
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I'm interviewing Bonnie Ladin in Washington D.C. on March 9th, 2007. Bonnie, tell me the story about how you first entered 9to5.

My first meeting with 9to5 was when I was actually working for an organization in California called the Campaign for Economic Democracy, which was started after Tom Hayden had run for the US Senate. I was one of two main staff people for that state-wide organization, and I believe...people knew each other. People in my organization knew Karen, and she was having a big meeting of all the 9to5 chapters. And the folks in my organization said, "Why don't you go visit?" So I went to the meeting and was quite taken with all the women at the meeting, because I generally worked with all men, and we ran quite a different operation where I was in California. So I was really taken with it, and thought this was the greatest thing, and immediately vowed to help set up a chapter—at least one in LA. I just felt it was the greatest thing and it would be really good for the work we were doing in California which was community-based/political work. So when I came back, I was very energized by it, and actually did help set up a 9to5 chapter in Los Angeles, which eventually was run by Judith McCullough, who came out from Boston. I shortly left the Campaign for Economic Democracy, I think it was in 1979, and went to work for SEIU. I went to work as a union organizer doing whatever the union asked me to do. I had worked in the union probably a year and a half when Karen Nussbaum called me and said would I be interested in working for District 925, they were starting this new union, and I thought that sounded like a *wonderful* idea. I jumped at the chance. I was already doing a lot of traveling for the union, they sent me hither and yon, wherever they needed something, and I thought this would be great, to do something with a more established group of people that I knew and liked, versus, wherever...on the campaigns that I was on.

In those years when you were working with SEIU you didn't have a base, in other words, you just went where they sent you?

I started—it's very funny—I started in Los Angeles, in February of 1979, and they had me working—there's no little direction, but I was so excited to be doing it, and I was working on a clerical campaign during the day--it was the office workers who worked for the gigantic Los Angeles Unified School District, who were in an association but we were trying to bring them into the union. Then at night, I was supposed to organize janitors, who worked for the State of California. I'd work all day with the office workers and then I'd go out to these buildings at 12 o'clock at night and, it was very dangerous. These guys mostly would join the union because they couldn't believe I was there at 12 o'clock at night in these weird areas of Los Angeles. But I was so excited to be a union organizer.

I worked on both of these campaigns and I brought my sensibilities from my political and community work with me to the union, the long and short of it is, I worked for SEIU, must have been all of four or five months when the organizing director asked me if I would move to Chicago because they were starting a big drive in Chicago. There was a new mayor there who was going to give collective bargaining rights to all the public employees and SEIU wanted in on that. Being an excitable young person, I said, "Why not," so I moved to Chicago. So but some of the interim parts--if anything came up in the union--like I remember there was a drive in Portland, Oregon--they'd say, "Go to Portland for 2 weeks," and I'd be off to Portland. So they'd send me anywhere. But...I was in LA, then they moved me to Chicago, then, you know, wherever.

Had you had any experiences with the women's movement?

I started college at San Francisco State in 1968 when the student strike happened and just by the nature of where I lived and people that I met I was right in the middle of all these famous—now sort of infamous famous people and everything. I was... 4 or 5 years younger than most of them but somehow I just was attached to them. So I did go to some meetings, conscious-raising meetings, the women would take me. But I didn't much take to those groups at the time because the women were very, whatever. different than me. I guess they were older than me, and the way they talked—they were very off-putting. They weren't friendly, you'd go to a 9to5 meeting and it would be very much, "Hello, come on in." The consciousness groups were much more like group therapy. All these women would talk about these "awful things" that men were doing to them. (Not really so awful.) So, I wasn't really part of a feminist movement—I didn't see myself as that at all. I'd been around it but I didn't feel I was part of that. It was just something I knew about.

When you were growing up, did your family have any connection with labor unions, or workplace struggles?

My family-- my Dad's side is Jewish, we were basically raised Jewish; they're from the Iron Mountain range of Minnesota, so there were very strong unions there, even though my Jewish relatives were more the shopkeepers. But they were very liberal, and my grandfather voted for Debs, and all. So there was that tradition. My Mom was Italian Catholic. She wasn't conservative, but she was less liberal than the Jewish side of my family. I just remember as a kid, the sentiments were just there. All my relatives were *very* strong Democrats, *very* strong pro-civil rights, all that stuff. They weren't marchers, necessarily, because my Dad had a store and everyone worked 18 hours a day. Even the kids worked in the store. I remember, I think I was probably 14 when the freedom rides started. I wasn't old enough—I was 13 or 14. I just would watch the TV and think, "I should be there." And I have no way of knowing why that was, but I really felt that's where I should be, and I was too young. So it just was always there. And I think, partly because I was raised Jewish in Los Angeles, in a city that was not—

you know, like here, in Montgomery County where my son grows up, they actually get the Jewish holidays off of school, and it's very—but there, you know, I got a lot of this taunting even though I don't look Jewish and nobody would think I was Jewish, that kids were always calling each other "dirty Jews" and that kind of stuff, and where I grew up it was like half Hispanic, half white. So there was just a lot of those kinds of tensions going on. So I think I just felt like this has to stop. You know, it was like at an early age you kind of sense there was wrong. You know. So I was disappointed I couldn't be more active.

What about your mother—did she work outside the home?

She only worked outside the home in the store. Again we had this store.

What store was it?

Well, my Dad called it the original Seven-Eleven. It was called Ladin's -- it was in Los Angeles right in the area of LA where all the aerospace industry was growing. So they were working 24-hour shifts. He was very lucky, my Dad put the store on a corner that people could just come in 24 hours a day, and he sold food and liquor, which you can do in California. So it was a little mini-grocery store. My grandfather, my grandmother, my mother, my Dad all worked in the store. So I can remember, as a 5, 6 year old kid, our job was the candy. We had to put the candy up, or when we got a little older, we all worked in there. So that was where my mother worked, not separately from that though.

Can you describe in some detail one campaign that was particularly important to you in District 925, an exhilarating moment?

Right, right. I always talk about the University of Cincinnati just because of how it was, and we built it from very little worker response. And it was such a big campaign. I actually think, probably what was most exhilarating was the first one we did in Cleveland. Because there had been the Equitable Life Assurance, with Cheryl, and I had been on the outskirts of that because we were organizing at Syracuse University so we mixed that all up together while we were working up there. But Cleveland, when we did the Cuyahoga Community College, I think, even in retrospect, I love it even more. Because here we were, I was supposedly the seasoned veteran, and I actually, when I think back on it, had more experience of just organizing in general from community work, political work, and union work than others. But not eons or anything. So I was the organizing director. But again, because I had done more campaigns, I would help think through what we were doing. Now Anne Hill, who ran the Cleveland office, is great, she'd follow through on everything, and she did the sloggy work, because by that point I was already traveling from city to city, checkingand would just check in on things. We were already doing the University of Washington, so I'd go back, forth, back, and forth. But what I loved about that campaign, and mostly in hindsight, well, I loved it because we were determined that we should do it really the way we thought campaigns should be

run in terms of developing leadership, in terms of running it cleanly—you know. Many, many union campaigns I'd been on, you'd cut a corner here, you'd cut a corner there, whatever it takes to get people excited, you know, so if that issue blows up, forget it, you know. We . In Cleveland we set out the issues, and we set about where we needed people, and which departments we needed leaders; we kept very strict count on our numbers, all that stuff that now, in most good organizing drives, people would say, "Well of course that's what we do." But in those days it was still haphazard. So we did an excellent job. We worked hard with the workers to figure out what the issues were going to be. But here was the real crux of the matter. There was no collective bargaining law in Ohio at the time. So these employers could just say to us, "We're not doing this." Right? "We're not doing this." And we were adamant, "Yes, you are. You're going to do this." I had no fear, which I translated to Anne—have no fear that we can get this done. And it's almost like ignorance is bliss. I knew that they didn't have to give us bargaining rights, but I also felt why shouldn't they, this is ridiculous, we can do this.

The absence of a law didn't prevent them from recognizing—

No, but generally what they'd do, and they did in this instance, you bring in a big law firm and you try to either stall out the process or whatever. So it was just one of these things where we really put all the pieces together. We did community work to try to put pressure on, we did this, we did that, and we had strong worker support and everything. So we did an excellent job. And the other part of that campaign—this is the part that's really funny—is that there are a lot of part-timers that work at Cuyahoga Community College. And they weren't going to be included in the unit. And that's standard, too, many times for them not to be included in the unit of full-time workers. But we were determined, because we'd organized so many of them. Anne was clear, "Well, we've got to do something; we can't just leave them out here." Again, many union situations, you just say, "We'll get back to you, bye bye." And we felt, "Ok, we got to figure this out." So we kept saying to them, "We will figure out a way to get you in the union." And we did. Now, that was not only odd because there was no law; there aren't part-time units. I mean, this was almost precedent-setting. But again, it was one of these things where we just thought, "We can do this. We're going to do this." And I remember at one point—that campaign came a little later. But we won Cuyahoga, we did it, and then we were determined to follow up on our promise to get these part-timers, plus it was a sizeable number of members. So we just proceeded to do our campaign again, our total campaign, and I remember Andy Stern who was organizing director at the time so partially my boss, already he looked at me and he said, ", there aren't part-time units this anywhere." And I said, "I know, but it'll be fine." We won! So to me, that was really great because I don't know if it was ignorance or it was just, "No, no, we can do this if we just set our minds to it" and we did. Now, not in every situation would that work but it worked there.

So you got that union—and those were public employees—

Yes.

--without a public collective bargaining law.

Right. Right.

That is remarkable.

And it was, I think a lot of people say, again, because it wasn't, Bank of America it wasn't legitimate --it was still a tough campaign. You had a big old law firm, you had politicians against you, you had to put everything together the same way you would on anything, and I think it was very instructive. It was great for Anne Hill in terms of her ability to start knowing everybody in town, and people respecting her work and the work of the District. That was the other thing; it really laid a great groundwork for what they were going to do there. So, yes, I'm always proud of that campaign.

Were there particular tactics from that campaign that you think were pretty innovative in the labor movement?

I don't know…I'm trying to think. We probably—this I won't remember as well, the day to day—but I'm sure we mixed in some of the 9to5 kinds of things, boss awards or whatever. Because again, because there was no law and no timetables, the campaign could drag on, and again, I have no recollection how long it actually took — I mean, it wasn't three years. But it wasn't real fast. So, I'm sure we did some of that. . the "non traditional" activities to keep people involved.

You mentioned community work.

Oh yeah, we always had to—Anne did a very good job of getting to know the other labor leaders in town, which again was as difficult as getting to know the labor leaders in SEIU who didn't really want to deal with this women's organization, and she did great at that—she actually did better I think in town than we did in our union. And whoever else we thought was appropriate. If we thought we should try to figure out some church groups or we should figure that this community group that we understood to be something we needed, especially in that public fight, where you had to have people on your side. So we did that. And yes, I think that was innovative at the time. If you look back historically it wasn't innovative at all, but there'd been this period where that wasn't done so much, and it was going back to those roots from the thirties and forties. I think those things, but I also think that we probably mixed some 9to5 tactics in there and I just don't remember exactly what things we did that helped a lot, that made it interesting.

Did you feel when you were working in any of these campaigns in your varied organizing history that you were putting workers' jobs at risk, or did workers sometimes feel that, and [how did] you deal with it?

Yes. Workers organizing are almost always in some jeopardy – even though they really shouldn't be. It's very funny that when I worked for 925 I felt less like anybody would lose their job than I did organizing almost anybody else, because of the nature of the

industry and the way they were treated by their bosses. Office workers have that relationship much like nurses have with their bosses - in their industries, where they're seen as quasi-management and even though they're not paid that well or really treated that well, but they associate in that way, consequently the campaigns from the employer are generally not hard core like they would be in a steel processing plant where they might just fire six guys to make a statement. Here they could do that in much more subtle ways just by having captive audience meetings or saying to a particular one, "Listen, if you be quiet, you could get a raise," and saying to this other one over here, "if you mess up, we might have to take away college tuition," things that which were very big things for these women workers. Honestly I felt less like people's jobs were in jeopardy. I felt they could lose things. But I didn't feel, it was one of these things where I felt with great confidence when we'd go around to meetings and women would say, "Well, what if we get fired?" And I'd say—and I felt this, "Generally that's not what's going to happen here." It's not to say that somebody—I'm trying to think back—never did get fired—I'm sure maybe somebody did—but compared to other industries where you organize and the reaction of the boss--it was just not the nature of that industry to really go whole hog and fire people in that way. Had we been more successful, I'm sure they would have. That might be a product of how successful we were— in other words if we were organizing right in insurance, or in banking—oh my God, they would have fired people like crazy. And I would have felt differently about the security of people's jobs.

Is it true that part of collective bargaining laws for public employees usually includes a clause that says they can't be fired for trying to unionize.

Yes, and that law exists for private sector workers as well – it obviously is not adhered to.

So in the states where they had those laws, they were protected.

Yes, because they have that written into the NLRB too, you're not supposed to be able to fire somebody, and still employers do it.... But yes, that was definitely true because it was public sector, and that's the other part. Public sector just feels so much easier than private sector. The campaigns are just not as tough. Even when they're tough like in Ohio where there was no law. So, I never felt people were in jeopardy. It was almost like trying to convince the women, "You're really not in that much jeopardy." Because all they could relate to was what they knew about unions that said, oh my God, I'm going get beat up, I'm going to get fired; something terrible's going happen to me. And that was not really what was going happen to them. Besides – there is always some risk in these struggles.

Did you have any experiences yourself as an office worker? Or what other kinds of jobs did you have besides organizing?

It's funny; I was never an office worker. And I actually always felt —I'm not sure why, that that was the job I couldn't get, for some reason. I mean, I was a hotel maid. I worked more of the grunt jobs. I'm trying to think of what else I did besides being a hotel maid, because I've had a lot of jobs. I worked in a Chinese restaurant, was a nanny,

worked in movie theatres. I was a waitress in Chicago, made great money, when I was going to school to be a baker, because I wanted to be a baker, actually, because I thought that was a good way to get in the union. This was after I was out of college. And when I went to the union in Chicago and said I'd like to apprentice, and be a baker, these guys—this is unbelievable, it's '73, '74—they say to me, "No, you'll just get pregnant, we don't want you in the union." I mean, they said that to me! I was so taken aback. Because I'm a big, strapping person, it wasn't like I was going to run off —of course I was only 23 at the time so I'm sure I looked like I might go off and have babies, but anyway, it still took me aback.

Which union would that have been?

Bakery and Confectionary Workers, in Chicago. So I found out about this fancy baking school in Chicago—it's called the American Institute of Baking. It's not in Chicago anymore, but at the time it was, and I thought, ok, I'm going to do this. And I went and I got a scholarship, and I was working as a waitress, while at nights, I went to school there at nights—and it was all for 8 hours a day—for six months—it was intense. I went with to school with 60 guys, who were sent there by major baking companies and fancy bakery outfits from all over the country, and we did everything. We had physics and chemistry and this and that, because you had to understand how bread and cakes and everything were developed from their very core, and you also had to learn how to run all the machines, and then they had a management piece, about how you managed people. So that was an interesting time. When I was done with it, just typical of me being the woman in the class, they had these reps come from big companies, ITT, Continental or other big bread companies came, and I got lots of offers, and all my offers were to work in quality control. I just thought it was so funny. Nobody thought, you could run a big bakery or you could do other manly jobs.

I didn't do that. I actually went to San Francisco because I saw that Tom Hayden was running for Senate, and I thought, well, let me go do that, and I went to Safeway there. And Safeway felt compelled in that year, 1974, for affirmative action reasons, to hire some women and minorities. So in my bakery—it was a very big store, right out near the beach in San Francisco—there was myself, and then there was an African American guy. Who'd been a baker for years, but he got treated pretty badly, and then all these old German bakers, who used to work in these beautiful little pastry shops and now had come to Safeway because the benefits were better. They just worked us—I mean, it was ridiculous. They used to throw flour—sacks. They'd say, "Here, catch," they just treated me really mean and all that stuff, but I learned a lot, and it was a good experience.

So, I always worked more manual labor jobs—I cooked for a restaurant, , those kinds of things—and I always looked at office work as this wonderful thing people could do where they wouldn't have to get cut up and backs broken and all of that kind of stuff, versus the kind of work I did. But I didn't do it. I never did office work.

Did you ever receive any training to do any of the organizing you were involved in, or did you just jump in?

I actually think the most training I ever got to do organizing was when I was a VISTA volunteer—in those days you could be a national or a local and I said, "I want to go to New York," so they sent me to New York. And they actually trained us for two weeks—because we were just out of college—even though I had participated in all the antiwar stuff so I actually had some background in how you organize.

There were some very interesting people. And they trained us for about a week, and they actually did something similar, when I think back on it now, to organizer training. Very brief, and we were doing welfare rights work. So it was more focused on that. Because here you've been out in the antiwar movement and all that and just doing things. People then would say, "Do this! Do that!" And you didn't really think about how you put it together or anything!. And then this training. It was just that week really that made a lot of sense to me. Then the work we did there was so varied. I put together a newsletter; I had it paid for by the community. We organized community folks—we had writers that were the community people. It was great.

Which city were you in?

I was actually out on Long Island in these really poor communities on Long Island of Patchogue, and Islip, and Wyandanch—I thought Long Island was well to do—and there's this little pocket in there—it was unbelievably poor. And so we were out there... we just did all this community organizing and welfare rights work, and then of course got in a fight with the Nixon administration because he was president then. We got kicked out, because we were being too responsive to the people and not doing what they (VISTA) wanted which I guess was nothing. But I will say out of all my years of doing organizing . . . that was the only training I got. But, but, just even that little bit, if you're doing it day to day, is probably enough – you learn on the job and different situations. We did a lot of door-to-door work; we did all this stuff, and obviously learned most of it on the job. But after that, in the union, no way, I walked in the door at the union and they said, "Go." They didn't even give me any cards, literature, or anything, they just said go. They barely told me what we were doing. (laughs) It was fun. I could figure it out from my past work.

Something I'm realizing in this interview, Bonnie, and after hearing you last night in your presentation that I'd to explore a little is the topic of—sort of the development of the leadership of District 925. You mentioned there were five people at one point and then maybe as many as ten. Can you describe a little bit how you five or ten people figured out how you were going to do this nationally? Did you—

That's what's so funny, when I think of it. I always think of Karen as the leader. She was the leader, I think we probably all thought she had a sense of where she wanted to go, or she has that persona, so even if she—we always felt she was one step ahead. And

we were much more in that mode early on, Karen was the strategist, and we were the tacticians. Not that when we had meetings we didn't all think through what we were going to do. But it was her overall vision, because she was 9to5, it was embodied in her. But when I think on it, what we did more was played to people's skills. Cheryl Shaffer and I had more union background, and Anne's was more antiwar and community background. Jackie Ruff's was a combo of 9to5 but working in the union in a more bureaucratic fashion. And that was our start, so we moved it from there. And I think just the sensibilities of 925— it wasn't "Don't forget, you have to do leadership," it just emerged. It's just kind of funny. But I think it had more to do maybe with— for myself personally, probably for Cheryl, probably for Anne, is that I never, as I just said, nobody ever trained me, nobody ever showed me anything.Nobody ever showed me anything about leadership building, nobody ever did that. So my way of operating always was wherever I worked, when I was at VISTA, where I was this, where I was that, and I don't even do it consciously—is I try to get a little gang together. I refuse to do something by myself. So I look around and I think, ok, who here, even if they don't know what they're doing, has potential to do something more. So my style has always been to then help these people figure it out, right? We figure it out together, because everybody has good ideas, and then I help them figure out what they don't know how to do. So that was my predilection, and then you bring in 9to5 sensibilities about, the way Ellen was talking last night about building leadership. And Cheryl, again, she had come from UNITE H.E.R.E. where they did very good work but didn't do a lot of this leadership thing, so I think we were all thirsty to sort of develop leaders in a new way. And, quite frankly, just practically, we needed good people because we could not do the work without more leaders and activists. When we found Kim Cook and Debbie, that to me—Kim Cook and Debbie Schneider are the real heart of the District 925, it felt like we had found 20 people. Because we actually found people that could—we could say to Kim, "Kim, go to Cincinnati." Even though she might say, "I don't want to go to Cincinnati," we'd say, "Go to Cincinnati," and you *knew* everything would be fine. Even though I'm sure if you asked Kim she probably felt, "They sent me to this God-forsaken place, and I didn't know what I was doing"—that might be her reaction. But when you went down to visit, as I did frequently, and work with her, she had it together. Partly just because she was good but partly because we were trying to help her along in a way. It was just organic—it wasn't, "Ok, today we're going to talk about how you do this," it was more that in the process of our work— because again we were so small. When she was working in Cincinnati, I'd go down there for 2, 3 days, and I'd do the same thing she was doing because it had to get done. It wasn't I'd say, "I'm the boss. You do that and I'll sit here." I'd just help her do it. So in the course of us doing the work, we would just talk about all the things. . ."what do we do about this, what do we do about that?"

Did you have the title "organizing director" [big] unions do?

I did pretty soon. When we first started, I didn't. We were all just staff. I can't remember when I became organizing director, but it wasn't very long before, I became

organizing director. So then you have this role of traveling around. But again, we weren't as hierarchical—I know as we grew, people definitely saw me as the organizing director, but in those beginning stages, it didn't feel, "I'm in charge." It was more I'm the one who's going to do more traveling; I'm going to go around… I think it reminded me of when Kim Cook became the organizing director near the end of the District's life I had to laugh, because it sounded like that. "Ok, she's the one who's going to travel, and she's going to go around, and Debbie's going to deal with DC." It was just a different way of thinking things through.

And from interviewing a lot of other people, they all talked about when you came in as, "And thank God Bonnie came in and helped me and supported me." It wasn't they were waiting until you were directing this. They needed you.

Right, exactly. That's what I mean, it was a different kind of thing, and when I was the liaison back to SEIU, right, I mean eventually I became a clerical organizing director so as part of their operation versus 925, it was kind of weird, but when I would talk to people back there, these guys, who I—some of them very good organizers who I liked very much, and they would say, "So—That's what I mean, it was a different way we worked, and when I would go to these different places I would sit with the organizers and we would figure it out – they knew the answers – just needed to talk it through.

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I had this route, basically all over the United States, and I would go to each city and we would get things done. We did not have a very formal situation. And it was very clear with our style of operating that this worked. Plus all the folks I worked with were enjoyable and very good organizers!

You loved all that traveling and not being—

I didn't mind going all over the country, but it's very funny, because I'm not a good flier. And if you knew how many miles I have flown, and there I'd be on airplanes sitting there gripping the armrest, and the person next to me would say, "First flight?" and I'd say, "No, I've flown six times this week." And I can remember calling my husband from Chicago once saying, "I can't get on another plane," and he'd say, "Get on the plane." Everybody was very supportive—it was very funny. When we first started, I'd stay in people's houses. I didn't even stay in hotels. I'd sleep in guest rooms or couches—I always felt I ruined Anne Hill's marriage, because I stayed at their house whenever we were working in Cleveland. I was in the back bedroom the whole time. And they were just newly married. And if I went to Chicago I stayed at Andrea's house, or Seattle I was at Pam's house. Then we got fancy and I actually stayed in hotels. But it was very close knit, the whole thing. It was just different. I think people used to look at us—some of the male organizers—and they'd never say this, but I think they were jealous, just

because we were so close --we weren't cutting edge enough for them--but you could see we had an organization that was enjoying itself and trying to do get things done.

Would you say that group of women was also your social network?

They really were and many still are in my social network. Definitely when you do this intense kind of work you have to hope the people you work with are your friends. The work is your life. It's funny, I watch that now in my husband too—you think, "where are my other friends?" And because it becomes so consuming, it's even hard to keepour other friends. I actually had this awful thing happen kind of in the middle of it—I had some very good friends from San Francisco who'd worked on political campaigns with me, and this one woman in particular, Laurie Parker, who—she and I were just like soul mates. She was younger than me by 5, 6 years. But we just—when we met each other, we just loved each other. And she started having terrible emotional problems. And I was on the road all the time. And people who knew me in San Francisco—and I would talk to her occasionally and she would always put on a happy face. So finally somebody called me from the road and said, "She's really bad, you need to get out here. She needs you." And I said, "Well I can't come right now." And to this day...And then I wound up talking to her on the phone a couple of times, she sounded better, and I was getting married and she was going to come to the wedding, and everything was happy, and she really sounded good—and then she killed herself. She jumped off the Golden Gate Bridge. And it was like one of these things where—it still haunts me to this day I think—you do this kind of work, you get so involved; I'm sure I would not have made the difference in her decision, but you feel like, it's hard to make the time sometimes, you know, and so you say, those are your only friends, and that's what happens. The other people kind of go—they're still your friends, but you don't work for the union? Because it becomes so consuming, it's hard to stay in touch with other friends. Something else, I remember someone told me when I became organizing director, and then later when I became clerical director, there are these little—not divisions, but there was a marked difference—it was almost as if you had to say to yourself, "Yes, they're my friends but I'm the boss." You had to make the difference. So it couldn't just be "Oh, this is so fun." It had to be more, "Ok, this has to get done." And I felt it a little then; when I first became organizing director; when I became clerical director I really felt the small divide between the organizers and myself. I became management to some degree.

Explain about clerical director.

What we did was, SEIU decided in about—oh, God, I'll get the years wrong. I want to say '85, '86 or something.SEIU decided in'85, or'86 to create a clerical division for all the locals in the union that represented clerical workers. Andy Stern was then organizing director, and he wanted to set up clear-cut divisions. So there was a health care division, a building service division, public sector division, and there was a clerical division, and allied services. And each division had a division director who was the policy person, who worked with a board of local leaders. Then there was an organizing director whose job was to manage and create organizing opportunities. Make it run. And so I'd been doing the 925 work, and basically, what was the distinction between 925 and the clerical division—not much, except that they wanted it to be more. So in other words I would work with other locals in SEIU who had a clerical base in public sector or something, to figure out how they could enhance that. Or or grow it. So, we went back and forth, and Karen—they all wanted me to be the director, I think Andy's only reluctance was I was living in Minnesota and I did not want to move to D.C. I said I could do the job because I was on the road anyway. In hindsight, it's always good to be in the place where you're working because you miss some of those meetings, but I don't know that that—Anyway, what was tough about the job was because you had the 925 people here and Andy was constantly—I felt like it was an EST meeting or one of those strong psychological things where—I felt he was trying to break me, like, "Who's side are you on" kind of thing. You know, more like, "You know, your allegiance has to be to SEIU, not to 925." And I would always say to him, "What do you want me to do?" Because I didn't feel like they were different. I felt like 925 was a functioning part of the division, and I could do 925 work and I could do other stuff, and I wasn't going to jeopardize other work for 925—you know. I kept saying to them, "Ok, I can do this." And I think he always felt paranoid that somehow that wasn't the case, or...who knows. So that made it tough. Because then there was probably on the part of 925 people--nottheir membership, while I was still doing a lot because I knew them and I would tell them, you know, "Geez, I feel this pressure, bluh buh buh." But they probably had slight reluctance too, like "Geez, maybe she's not giving us everything we're due." Even though I didn't—I could do budgets but I didn't make the final money decisions—somebody above me did that. It just got more complicated because it was partly just playing out what was always there about 925 being this national local, that John Sweeney and the powers-that-be thought was a wonderful thing and cutting edge, and they really were very supportive. And then the locals in the union were not so high on it. A couple of women heads of locals, or women in locals who had good positions thought it was a great thing. But generally most of the men thought, "Well, why do they get special treatment, and why do they get their own thing, this is silly, it's not

really producing that much"—you know, there was just a lot of backbiting. So I feel like all that happened here as we moved through history...it was playing out. And it played out, a lot of it, in my job. Here you have the 925ers over here and you have the rest of the union over here and what are you gonna do for the rest of the union, and—you know, that kind of thing.of work for District 925. I felt as if I had two masters and no one was really satisfied.

So that was a pretty stressful time for you, would you say?

It was a little stressful, mostly I felt as if I should get more accomplished. The worst thing was that some of our really good people would go to work in other divisions of the union. Valarie Long is a good example. She had come to us from working with Steven Lerner who ran the Building Service. But I feel like when she was with us—you know, she had a small child, it was really tough for her, but she was determined to do this and not get special treatment. And she was very good but she kind of grew up with us. She was very young. She worked in a couple different offices for us, did different work—

Us being 925?

925...When she needed to take a writing class because it would improve her ability to write stuff, we said, "Great, go do that." You know, the union wouldn't have done that. That kind of stuff. And then at some point when all this started happening more with the divisions, she was more, "Oh, I want to go back and work with Steven—I want to work in Building Service," because, if you looked around, our stuff was really hard, and Building Service had this very clear strategy that seemed to be working, in a way that, even though we had a strategy, ours was much harder to see those kind of results. So she left. Then they would come to me and say—you know, by this point we had a much bigger staff. And they'd say—Gail Gabler—I'm thinking maybe her—we could really use her for six months on this campaign over here. Where before they wouldn't have done that if we were just the District. And you couldn't really say no. Because again, that would have—

You were was an integral part of the Cincinnati, or what I can't think of the woman's name did at Harvard or Yale—or how they organized at Harvard and Yale, this one-on-one painstaking stuff. I can just see most men at some point--even though I know John Wilhelm, a man, was very integral in that strategy. I can see a lot of people just blowing it up. Good example—Andy Stern. Every time he'd say, "No, no, no, that's good," we'd be on something

slow-going and everything, but they'd say "Come on! Hurry up! Hurry up!" And I don't know whether that's just the demands of the union, or whether that's just a male thing, or whether that's just an Andy thing. But it was very much like that all the time, you know, "No, no, no, that's really good—hurry up, hurry up!"

A mixed message.

Right, and I've heard him now say, or somebody read it, this whole thing about "You know, we should have given them more money or more time,"—

That was in his interview.

Right. Yeah, they should have done all those things, right? And it's ironic because now they're trying to do this funny project and then in Cleveland, but she wanted to go organize private sector – so she went to the Building Service Division and has been wildly successful there, she got a call from Janice Fine—now I know that name. I don't know. Anyway, somehow, who's doing some kind of project to look at it. And she calls my friend and she goes, "Have you ever thought that this has some similarities to 925?" Well, Patricia worked with 925 in Chicago or something--she went, "Well, yeah!" So, we just had to laugh, because it was kind of like, will Andy stick with that one, or will he come to the same conclusion that, "It's a good idea, but—come on!" (Snaps fingers.) – we missed her and others as we tried to win more and more campaigns.

How much attention did you as organizing director give to training and teaching about respecting and honoring and valuing diversity in the organization.

I actually think that that was really one of the things that were really inherent in the organization—it didn't have to be me. It was just there. It was very clear that *every* person who was in any authority felt it very strongly. So it wasn't as if you had to say, "Remember..." It was much more that they were always looking and always trying to make sure that who we were bringing in represented who we were organizing. I actually think locally they did a very good job. On our organizing staff, we didn't do as well, I don't think. LikeThere was a diverse group in Chicago I remember Andrea Gundersen was there. And we made sure—maybe it was Chicago—we hired a lot more African Americans and, we had this ex-nun, we had all different kinds of people on the staff. It was an interesting experiment because we were very determined there to do that. So we went outside of traditional...instead of going, "Hey, I have a friend who'd be great to do this," or somehow you knew somebody and they did turn out to be great or something. Or manyMany of our women recruits came in because they

saw 925 and they thought, "God, I've always wanted to do union work. But this is the only place I'll do it, because this is with women and it'll be great." So in Chicago our experiment was very mixed, right, because it wasn't exactly those people, I think we actually did interviews, put out ads, found people different ways—

These would be for staff, for organizing?

Yes, for staff organizers. And it made for a much different set-up. It was very interesting, you know what I mean, when you didn't go right to that kind of woman who was looking for us, who was so excited, all that kind of stuff, and you went more to say, ok, we're gonna have a diverse staff that's based here in Chicago, that are Chicagoans. . . It was very mixed. It was just really interesting. We got lucky on a couple people, and very unlucky on a couple other people--not like every person we hired was fabulous, but generally we'd find one good person even if two others flaked out or something, and when we found a really good person early on, they were really good. And so they helped us move that much faster even though they might be one person as opposed to this whole Chicago thing I remember which kind of...oi (sighs). You know, it took a lot of energy and time, and didn't produce much worth. So I just think it was pretty inherent in people's thinking. We didn't do as well as we probably would have liked, if you think about it, we probably should have had a person of color in the national leadership, which we didn't have, even though we had people on staff and people on the board, and all that kind of stuff. So we didn't do terrible, but...

In the communities of Ohio and Chicago, you could hire a diverse staff, was it less easy in Boston and Seattle?

Exactly.

Where the clerical work force isn't very much people of color.

No. But Kim Cook, she will be looking all the time. She will go out of her way to figure out how she can make her staff diverse and reflective of the workforce.

Do you think 925 was a family-friendly organization for the staff that worked there?

It's really mixed, it was interesting. I didn't have my son until after I had left 925. There's no way I could have done what I was doing, I barely could be married. I wasn't married for a lot of the time I was doing my organizing director job was ridiculous. And I remember once getting in a cab in Chicago and the guy said, "Haven't I seen you before?" And he said, "You're not married, are you?" And I said, "Well, yeah, I'm married." He says, "You don't have any kids," I said,

"No, no, no." And it was like he was just curious how could I do this. And I thought, there's no way. And I remember when Karen first had her kids, it was like, oy, she and Ira were passing them off at the airport, and Anne was helping, and....here's. Here's what I think. I think we actually were pretty good, as things go, because this work is so tough. And it's so consuming and demanding. I think that actually when we got better at it, what happened is we actually changed the organization some to accommodate, in that, Anne was pretty rooted in Cleveland anyway, but when she had her kids it was clear she wasn't going to be traveling anywhere, she was going to be in Cleveland doing her work, right, so that was one of the ways Cleveland was solidified. If you asked anybody, they wouldn't say that's why we picked Cleveland—we picked Cleveland because we had success there but also Anne was rooted there, right? Debbie didn't want to go to Cincinnati but once she got there and fell in love and had a baby, then she was in Cincinnati, it was funny. And Cheryl was in Boston, and when she had her son she actually just pulled back all the way, because she used to do traveling with me. She'd travel around and then it was, no, no, no, I'm not doing this, right? So we changed the organization. I think we were respectful. We were respectful, we understand, but people felt likeeveryone knew they really needed to hold up their end, do good work. So they did. But I think the thing that was most interesting about it is I think it flavored our work because our key people all had kids. And so, one wonders. Two things I always wondered about. One is, if no one would have had kids, running like lunatics, if it would have made any difference. Not that I think they should have done that. . . And the, but, you can wonder. The other thing I always wonder i--s, and we debated this for years--we plunk, instead of dropping down in these cities. And , and again, this partly had to do with our sensibility about people's lives, if we would have said to all of us, we all have to go to Seattle—we all have to go to one city, and really put all of our smart energies into one place, how much could we accomplish. And it'll always be one of those things you wonder. If you would have had Debbie, Kim, me, Cheryl, Anne, plus all the other people that we brought in, Andrea, and Pam MacEwan, and all those people, if we could have put everybody in one city, and said, "Ok, you do public sector, you do private sector, go." What could we have accomplished?

That was actually a discussion [at some point]?

Well, it was discussion off and on...I think more in hindsight, if we would have done that, what would that do. But again—Anne had a life in Cleveland; this one had a life here. That one had a life there. So it wasn't going to happen. But it was one of these things where you think, if it were a different time, or if we felt this had to work, what would have been the result. Could have been we could have busted up, we could have had no more success in the private sector—I doubt it. I think if you would have had all of us in one place, we would have thought of something. Or we would have created something a little different. But again, that's pipe dreaming.

Hindsight's 20/20.

Right, right, exactly, exactly.

Interesting. And I guess that conversation started when you were confronting how difficult it was to keep the national going, and SEIU was—

And we had resource issues, at one point we had this huge campaign, we had a fair share campaign going at the University of Washington which would have made everybody pay dues, because they didn't have to at one point. That campaign win would have helped us financially enormously and just stature-wise and everything. At the same time we had the first University of Cincinnati campaign going on. And when I think about what a shoestring budget we did all that on, we probably would have won both—you know, we might have one both campaigns the first time with more organizers and money. Today, the union would have flooded both those campaigns with staff. We lost both of them initially and we won them later. But I think some of it was our expectations about what we would be given, and even--in those days if you said you want help, he might have sent me two organizers. He didn't think were all that hot, or—you know what I mean? Not necessarily—

There was a question of integrating them into your system.

Right. And so it's different, but yeah, you know, it's the same thing with resource

In your opinion, were the aims of 925 realized?

I don't know. When I think about 9to5, and moving into District 925, I definitely have always felt that 9to5 did a wonderful thing. And I always say that, I see it in every magazine, every book, and every TV commercial where they talk about women, there's 9to5 influence in that stuff today. That organization really set the tone about how women are viewed now. And so I think that was a *huge* success that nobody will ever talk about.

For the District, I sometimes feel we overstate our glory. Because we didn't win in the private sector, and I feel that was really the thing that would have set us apart. That would be the thing that, when I show little history videos in my class, if we had done that, I'd have a little history video of us doing something there. Because we only organized what we did, I feel we were a good organization, and the legacy is much more that in the time and history we were, young women were looking to be active, would come to us, where they wouldn't have come to unions, regular unions, and they got active and they became wonderfully good at what they did, and many of them are spread out all over SEIU and other parts of the movement, and that's a great thing. I think that's a wonderful thing. Could we have done that in some other format? I don't know. Probably not. It probably had to be 925. Because if you would have just said, "Come on with us, we're really going to train you well," nobody would have done that, right? So they really did

all come believing in the 925 idea, they really wanted to be part of that. So I'm of mixed feeling. I really believe in 9to5. I think—again, I'm too close to it. I think with the District I feel much more, "we failed," because I was such a big part of it. But we did some things very well —now I see it more clearly than I did then. You need distance on this stuff, and it's been quite a while now. How well we actually did we train leaders, train our staff, everybody had evaluations, and all this stuff that even now is hard to find in union work. But we just knew to do these things. So I think that's really a good thing. I don't know that we came up with real innovative tactics. I think, as I said yesterday, we came at a time when unions were coming back to organizing, and the things that I knew to do were the things that a handful of guys knew how to do too, and so we were all moving at the same time to get people back to that good organizing, right? So it wasn't that we were the only ones. We were part of a movement that was coming back to the unions then. But we did have a definite little piece of something. But the success in the private sector wasn't there and that will always greatly lessen our accomplishment.

Yeah, and they kind of think in numbers—

Yeah.

--in a way, rather than...

Yeah. It'd be interesting—I don't know if you guys talked to John Sweeney to see what he would think about—

Yeah, we did. The leadership recognized, I think, the production of women leaders, and mainly that's how they see the legacy. Excuse me, I'm going to—

[tape [Tape shuts off]

START of TAPE 2

This is a reflective question for you, Bonnie. What did the experience of working for 925 mean in your life, when you assess your development as organizer par excellence?

I really enjoyed it. I really did. I think about all the union work I've done, and sometime I would be in campaigns and I would really enjoy them. And then other times I'd think, "Ugh, I'm just marching on." You're just doing the job because you're in it, and you keep thinking, "Maybe I should go be a teacher," or maybe I should go do something else —but I did enjoyed my time in 925. Again, because the women I worked with were so great,

You were one of the few—

Oh, yeah, in the leadership, I was like the one woman. And we'd have these meetings and I'd sit there going, "Oy!" And plus I was younger than them, and so I always felt a little intimidated, and even though I'd always do the work, it was more like, it started that whole terrible thing that happens with women—it did in SEIU all the time where they'd say the men were such strategic thinkers and the women were great tacticians. It used to make me *wild!* But I can understand it back from my days when I did political work and when I did community work, way back, before the union, that, I can see how that happened. Because I would be intimidated by these guys, not only by their reputation but by their very strong egos, and I would just—the way I got through was I worked twice as hard as them, and I did twice as much work as they did, like organizing things, getting things done, whatever, that was just how I did it. So coming to 925 was so refreshing. Because even when I first came to the union I worked with all men, in LA and Chicago. And it was just so refreshing to not have that. And I really felt like I could blossom more, because again I didn't feel intimidated to say anything. I could say whatever I want and do whatever I want.

You could become a strategic—

The strategic—right! Exactly! Until you went back to the SEIU building and they made it clear that you weren't, right? Or something. So it was great for me, and I also just really—you see we've remained friends. All of us have really remained friends, even the ones that I—like getting this call from this young guy who was in my class saying he just ran into Carol Edelson. I don't see her much anymore, we talk occasionally. But people think fondly of each other. It's not like they go, "Oh yeah, she was an asshole," you know, like you would of many people you work with. She'll say—"She taught me how to organize"—she didn't need to say that. She could just say to this young kid, "Oh, I know Bonnie." But it's kind of just this thing that happened, where for a lot of us, a big group—I want to say that it was 20, 30 people, like that, maybe it's more--feel that way. So it was very pleasant, and I missed it very much when I left. It was...even when I went just to the division side, I felt removed. I was telling you how first you become a supervisor, and then I felt really removed and I felt much more of that stuff that goes on in unions where they were paranoid that I wasn't giving them as much due, or you know, this that and the other thing

happening, and that I didn't like. And so there were periods when I didn't—it wasn't like I was mad at anybody, but you just wouldn't talk to people as much as you used to, obviously, because you're not working with them day to day, but then everybody's on different wavelengths and everything, so the conversations are a little stilted. And now, we're so far removed from all that, we can all be friends again. But I really enjoyed it, and I think for me it was a really good way to put my style out there in a way that I really always did do campaigns. When I think about—when I first ran a political campaign in San Francisco, I was 24 years old, and the first Asian ever elected in San Francisco, I ran his campaign for Board of Ed. It's so crazy when you think about it. I was the only paid person on the staff, and what I did was, I found these three young women—I don't even know where I found them, when I think about it now, and they were not paid. But they worked with me night and day. And we put together this operation, along with all the money we got from the Asian community and everything, and we won! Right? That was like the same thing we could do at 925 many years later, because again—there were men all over the place, and all these guys telling me, "Well you don't really know what you're doing," and this and that, but I just said, "I can do this." And I got these women who were, "We can do this." Like it was a gang, right? And we did! So it was kind of like taking—and that was so euphoric for me. I was so young. Who knew any better! So we did that, and then I started working with all these men again and everything, and then here was 925. So for me personally, it was a wonderful...you know, just like blossoming, a way you could just take your sensibilities and put it out there. In a way that you didn't have to feel threatened by anybody, or what you were doing. So I really enjoyed it for that.

Do you think the dynamics between women and men in the union movement have been transformed somewhat in this period of sort of the second wave of feminism? Are women speaking up more?

Yeah, I think they are. I'm not in unions now, but I listen to my friend at SEIU, and she talks about this younger generation of women. It's a little different though. She talks about it that they're much more, maybe as we'd expect, they're very self-possessed. And they're in there pushing all the time. A lot of it is just like male behavior, though. How are they going to move up in the organization, how are they going to have more control, how are they gonna—And when she first got back there she was like totally freaked out, because she doesn't come from them—she was like, "What

happened here? Oh my God." But, I said, "Well, it's different. It's just different. You have to look at it differently." And as she gets in there, she sees some people have good sensibilities and not every single person is an automaton trying to get ahead or anything, but that life changes. And people's sensibilities about how they're going to move in an organization, and these women may have learned what we never would do. Right? We were always like—you know, when they'd say, "You're a tactician, and I'm a strategist," we'd kind of go, "Okay," and we'd go do that, as opposed to these women who are kind of like "No! I'm gonna do what I'm gonna do," and they just have a harder shell because that's what they need to have, right?

I'm not around it enough to know. I think the unions understand much more now how much they need women. And I don't care what union it is, except for some of these building trades, oy vey, that are so ridiculous still. But most unions totally understand that in many ways that women are going to be better organizers...they probably even see that, right? But I still think there is this tactician-strategy thing going on, still happens to this day. And so I will not say to any of those young women who come on really strong, "Don't do that," right? Because maybe that's just how they figured out how you get past it. You have to be as big and brash as the boys, and if you show any weakness, then they'll think you don't have a brain again, so that's what you have to do. Oh, I think it's much different. I just think about, in my husband's union, where he's really trying to change things around, and you'll go to a—I went to a big board meeting, and you still see so many male heads of locals. My husband's like embarrassed by it. And I said, "Well, what are you going to do? That's what they do. And to change the culture is so hard. But you also know that there's a lot more women in those organizations [than] were ever there. And eventually they will take them, and whatever else, but...It's a long process. And if you just looked at it from SEIU perspective, that's like an anomaly, SEIU is, because it's not rank and file union people. They brought in all these college-educated types from all over the place to be in the union movement—you know, more. I'm not saying there aren't some rank—so it's so different. You can get the best and the brightest who think, "Oh, this looks interesting, I'll go work for a union for a while! I'm a strategic thinker, I'm new," and they all run over there, and so it's a much different operation than most unions where you actually have rank and file people running the union. And when you look at those versus SEIU, that's where you can see if there's progress or not. Because in those unions, yes you see a lot more women. And you see

women being actually treated with respect. I mean, they may be 20 years behind where SEIU's at. They might be back at where 925—you know they all need a 925 organization to really perk 'em up. But you see the difference in those. So to me, that's how I know there's really different—

In the traditional unions you see different...

Yeah. Yeah. I mean again, they're still pretty male, but there's a lot more women, and they're treated equally.

What work did you do after you left 925, and tell us about the work you're doing now?

When I left 925, I actually went and organized with SEIU. Because it didn't end well, it was kind of one of these things where Andy wanted to make a change, so it was kind of like, he said, "You can do whatever you want." (Chuckles.) Oh, that's nice. But anyway, I basically worked as what they call a rep for the region, for SEIU, so I started doing different things. Which was actually good, learned more skills -- and then I had my son. So it all worked out great. Because first I was doing regional work, so you'd travel. I was living in Minnesota, but I might travel to Chicago or Kansas City or here or there to help out on Something...anything from an organizing to a bargaining campaign or whatever. And then when my son was born I actually worked much more locally in Minnesota. And the great thing about that was that I worked in Betty Bednarczyk's local, who later became the Secretary-Treasurer of the union. And she's very wonderful, and she had almost all women on her staff.

And then we moved out to Sacramento, I worked out there, my husband got transferred. So we went out to Sacramento and I worked for the California State Employees Association which was like this renegadethe largest local of SEIU. It has 100,000 members, and I ran the state university division, which was about 15,000 members, and did that for a while.

Then we came back to D.C. I went to work in the nursing home division at SEIU. We were working on the Dignity Campaign for nursing home workers. That was really fun. I *loved* it. Because working with nursing home workers was so different than office workers. These women, mostly people of color, totally screwed on their jobs, but they *totally* got the union. You did not need much explaining, it was just, "Where do I sign, my boss is a jerk, I get nothing,", so I was just in heaven, because it was so different for me. No struggling to make the workers understand about the union. I just went wild. I had the best time. What wound up happening is, my boss became the health care director, I became the nursing home director, then my boss left the health care division and I became the health care director of the union for a year or so.

Of the whole division.

Of the whole division. And it's one of these things that—I laugh about now. It's the story of my life. I would start out in some job I loved and someone would ask me to step up to a more difficult job and I would do the more difficult job – even if I didn't really want it – so I could be helpful to the organization. I loved being the nursing home director. That I did love. It was just perfect. Because it wasn't a giant division, but the workers were wonderful. I had a wonderful staff, again, and we loved working together, men and women. When I became health care director everything changed again. Now I was on the *big* stage, and I didn't like it, I should have said no.

I left that job after the SEIU convention in 2000. I left the union after much thought and reflection – I had worked at SEIU for 20 years and felt that the union always did good work. Just time for me to go another way.

The something else was. . .that was not defined?

Well, they offered me about 12 different jobs. But nothing I really wanted to do. So I just said, "No, I'm going." And I think they didn't believe it, because I just was always around. You know, I was just always there. And so they kept calling me, saying, "Well, we got six more jobs, how about these," and finally I just said, "No," and it was very liberating for me. I had to talk it through for a long time because I knew I felt like I was leaving the labor movement, because I couldn't see myself working for another union either, because I'd been there so long. And that was really hard.

Talking it through with family and friends?

It was my husband, and my friends, but I didn't want to be obnoxious, so I just—but at some point I just said, "That's it, I gotta go. I can't do this. It's too hard, what he's doing to my head," more than anything else. So when I left, I just took some time. And actually what I was going to do, it was very funny, I had signed up with—Johns Hopkins has this program to get your masters in education—I just have a B.A. It's one of these programs where they put you right in the classroom, basically, and then you write a portfolio or something through the year, and you say what you've learned, kind of thing, and I thought, "This is great for me. Because then I don't have to do the book stuff." So I went through the whole process and everything, and they came to me and said—Montgomery County where I live, there's a million people—great teachers, everybody wants to work there, good salaries and...they said, "We really think you'll be perfect for Baltimore City." Right where they got some of the toughest schools, right? "Because

of your background, you'll be great there, and we really want you to go there," and I didn't mind the tough schools, I just didn't want the commuting to Baltimore every day and all that. Again, I was trying to find something so I'd be home for my son who was getting a little—you know, middle school, and...Serendipitously, my friend Patricia called me and said, "Listen, I'm teaching an organizing class out here at the National Labor College. Can you come out and do a day for me?" So I said, "Sure." So I came out and taught a day. It was fun. I teach here at the Labor College. And I said, "Well, I want to teach in high school." That was my goal: to be one of these 50-year olds going back to teach in high school. And they said, "Well, we would expect you to get another degree, and we will set it up so you can take a master's of education while you're here," and I thought, "Well what could be better. I'll be doing organizer training, and then I'll get my master's. It'll be the best combo in the world." So that's why I'm here. It's kind of taken twists and turns, mostly because of my illness. Because since I've been here—I came here in 2001, and I've had operations almost every year I've been here, and chemotherapy, so, it's been a great place for me to land. Who knew at the time--it would have been awful to still try to be doing union work through all this, because the stress level's way too much for it, and personally the stress level would be too much, because actually when I was at SEIU, even when I was the nursing home director and the health care director, my disease had already—my cancer had already kicked in. So I had two or three operations while I was there. And I know what that was like. Literally the first one, I had to be rushed to the hospital, because I was working, and I couldn't be bothered—my doctor kept saying, "You need to get in here," and I was like, "Ok, ok, ok, but I'm really busy!" And I wound up having emergency surgery that night, you know on these big tumors and everything, and I always felt like I had to race back from my surgeries—I'd be laying in bed a week later —"Ok, this is what you do on this"—you know, telling everybody what to do, and coming back—

Talking on the phone?

Yeah, and coming back way too soon, so you're tired longer than you need to be. And I did that. And again, I kept thinking, this is a manageable disease, so I wasn't going to let the disease stop me, but again, in these high-powered jobs I had at least two surgeries while I was there, maybe three. And it was tough. That was tough. So given everything, it's really a good thing that I had left the union because to manage this illness—I couldn't have done it. I would have had to leave anyway. It just would have been too

hard. This is a great place to be because you can keep at a better pace. And, recently here, I will say when I first got here, I was kind of like, "Ok, this is so slow-paced, and so out of my league"—I was really having trouble with the transition, because I was used to such high-powered fast-paced stuff, and I was like, "Come on! —and teaching is just so different, and thinking—and all that. In the last—I don't know what's happened, in the last year things have really picked up, I mean we have projects where we're working with unions on leadership development, so that's great, I really enjoy that, because I'm back to doing some of that. And my classes—I have more classes that I'm teaching, and teaching about the subjects that I know. So—

Which is primarily organizing and leadership development, and I do some stuff on strategic bargaining or those kinds of things. And even in the degree classes I teach, the topics are all about organizing and maybe historical perspectives or modern-day perspectives and leadership. Leadership's a big thing with me. I also teach that as well. So it's turned out fine. Sometimes I still feel very guilty that I'm not doing something more, right in the middle of a fight. This seems so tangential and removed, and it is. A dilemma for me.

You obviously see the connection between training—

YES
--and organizing.

Yes. And I do enjoy it.

But you're not [ready] to leave the front, is what you're saying.

No, and I also understand that a lot of the training I do here is to a very mixed bag of people, I'll have ten different unions sitting in the room. So you can't be very specific, right? There are two things that make me wild. One is, you can't get as specific, so I've learned how to do that. But the other thing is that you don't get the follow up. Right? At the height of our 925 or any other campaigns I worked on, that's the beauty of the thing, you keep following it. And here, occasionally I'll have people who will call me back and say, "How do I do this," but generally they just go off into the night. And so that's the part you feel bad about. Even if they say, "This has really helped me," it would help you a lot more if you could continue. If you could follow. . . Yeah, and it also makes it very clear— the organizers.

In the union.

Yeah! More and more, this union or that union will say, "Oh, we're going to put together a training program," and that's great, but my God, they should

have had these! It's like frightening. So then I think, "Yeah, we gotta keep doing this," it's almost like this dying art, which seems insane. Because people need this.

That was certainly one of the key things about 9to5, even in your earlier organizing, right?

Right.

I shouldn't say nothing was left to chance, but it was planned out—

Exactly.

--what you were going to do.

Exactly. Exactly.

File cards. The luncheons.

So it kind of comes full circle and you go, "Geez."

Are people at this Labor College in a position to encourage unions to do more training?

Well, we try.

You don't really have any policy role.

No. We just—it happens two ways. They'll come to us—like we're working with the air traffic controllers now. I and a few people. And they have new leadership and they realize they need to do something because their whole membership is turning over, because when you get to be a certain age there you have to retire, and now they're going to have all these —so they really need—so they realize that. So we will work with them. Other unions, you can encourage, but they may think they're going to do it their own way. Like IBEW—I've worked with them. They're doing a training set-up that they're doing for all their local leaders. When I see the agendas, I can make suggestions, but it's really their thing. So, you come at it different ways. Their thing, I kinda look at it and go, "Oy, I would do a lot less of this and a lot more of this," but that's their choice, right? At least they're doing training; I guess that's the good thing. As opposed to the air

traffic controllers, who are much more, "We want to do surveys, we want to do focus groups, we want to figure out what we need to do to get to our members." That's a much different approach than you get from most unions who say, "I want them to learn about the financial responsibility..." and eventually they get to leadership and those kinds of things. So it's a very mixed bag.Unions either sign up for our existing courses or ask us to develop something especially for them.

Final question, Bonnie. Do you feel optimistic about the organizing going on in unions now, from your long experience?

I feel somewhat optimistic. I look at the Change to Win unions, which is UFCW, Teamsters, UNITE H.E.R.E., Laborers, SEIU, the Carpenters and the UFW. And even my husband's union, the UFCW, they're not as far along as they should be at this stage, but they're making great strides to get to a point where they can be very successful in their organizing. SEIU has been very successful in their organizing, I think; UNITE H.E.R.E. has some very good pockets, as do the Teamsters. Those unions I think are really focused on what they need to do. So they can give you hope. But they can also bring you down, because you realize even when they're doing a very good job, they're not...even SEIU; it's not that they're bringing in millions. It's not as if they're having people saying, "That's what I want, man, I'm going there to the union." Right? It's a whole different game. So I can feel very pessimistic about the whole thing most of the time, but I keep thinking that the present situation, just economically and socially, will not allow unions or something like unions--maybe it'll be a new configuration, I'm not sure. People more and more I think are starting to understand what's happening to them, right? It has to get bad—it's the same way about the war, right? It took people three years to go, "Oh, this is really bad." And I think more and more, people are starting to get it about the economy, about how bad off they really are, and how nobody is doing anything to help them out of this, and that they will see that there is some way they can organize to...If it's a traditional union, that's great, if it's some other organization, that's also great. Maybe the unions need to change to fit what that is. I guess sometimes I keep thinking because the electronic world changes so fast, maybe that's what has to happen in the unions, they need to change to fit how people think now. Other times I think, — the problem is unions are too bureaucratic, and too—so they're very intimidating to people. But the notion of the organizing, I think...I feel like there's going to be—I'm sure I said this ten years ago—but I feel there's going to be a renaissance. I just do. I just think things are too precarious right now, that the people are going to say, "Whoa!" And young people. They're either going to do something, or they're going to be so cynical and so bummed out that it'll be really bad. So...

These aren't optimistic times in general for people who believe in social equality and —

Right. No, but you see these signs, you see some signs and you think—it's hard for me to put all my faith in the fact that the Democrats won things. But then I think, the reason

they won is because people understood about the war. It wasn't necessarily that Nancy Pelosi's so cool; they wanted her to lead them, right? And so I think that's the cool thing —that they finally got it. And it didn't take them 12 years, it took them 3 years. And it took some dying, and other struggles, so maybe they will understand that about the economy as a whole, and the work that they've done on the Wal-Mart Watch. The bigger campaigns they do against Wal-Mart. And they've had huge amounts of success in the last year. It's been growing exponentially the amount of people who come into the websitesneed for unions.
You've got to say "yes I want to do this." Joe, my husband, had said this once and now everybody in his union talks about it. He'd say, "I used to go to bed every night thinking, "God, how are we ever going to make an impact on Wal-Mart? How is that ever going to happen." And then he says, "Now I go to bed at night and I think, "I'm happy thinking every night Wal-Mart goes to sleep thinking, 'What are we going to do about these people that are bothering us.'" So that's a big change.
You know, you gotta feel hopeful, right? What are you going to do? You've got to feel hopeful. I refuse to think that we just had [all this activity]blip and we just were unsuccessful and things are just going to deteriorate and get bad, because we couldn't figure out a way to make it big enough to...have enough people participating. So, we will figure it out.

END of INTERVIEW