

**Cheryl Schaffer  
Interviewed by Ann Froines  
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Boston, MA**

**I'm interviewing Cheryl Schaffer in her office at the Center for Corporate Citizenship at Boston College, January 19, 2006. Cheryl, let's start with you telling me the story about your first contact with 9to5.**

Well, you know, I'm not sure I remember. I'd been involved in an office workers union organizing campaign at Hampshire College in the mid-seventies. I'd been working at Hampshire College as a secretary. We were organizing a campaign that we lost. As a part of that or after that, I ended up coming to Boston to meet with the 9to5 people. And met Karen and I think Jackie and probably Doreen at that point and just had discussions with them about what they were doing, how they were thinking about it, unions vs. associations. I then went and got a degree in labor relations at the University of Massachusetts and went to work in probably 1978 for the ILGWU [International Ladies Garment Workers Union].

**In New York?**

In New York, yes. I worked on the island and then I worked upstate. A part of that was I had decided that was what I wanted to do, was do organizing. By luck and karma the ILG was a good place to learn that and I really had good luck in terms of who I worked with and who trained me. During that time I believe I was in touch with 9to5, kind of as they were developing their own plans and changing, on an informal basis. So when the district got founded by the Service Employees, it must have been 1981, Jackie or Karen called me up and said, "This is what we're doing. Are you interested in doing it?" I said yes, because at that point I was living in Troy, New York, of all terrible places. Although I loved the ILG, it was clearly a union that was not going anywhere. There wasn't a lot of room in it for new ideas. As it turned out there weren't that many women who had as much organizing experience as I had at that point.

**Describe briefly some of the campaigns and organizing you did with the ILG.**

Oh, Lord! What did I do? Well, you know, I was very young and I had no idea what I was doing when I started so I did what they have all their organizers do. I went in shops. I actually was an asset to them because I was young, I was unattached. I was either stupid or fearless or some combination and I had an industrial sewing background. I'd supported myself for a while sewing so I could be the perfect mole. I went in a lot of shops.

**You actually got jobs?**

Oh, yeah, and did preliminary organizing work in terms of figuring out what was going on. They had a very home-based visiting model. I did a lot of home-based visiting. And they ran a lot of strikes. They organized by strikes pretty much. One way or the other that's where we ended up.

**What does that mean, exactly.**

You'd get a majority of cards. You'd call for a card count and pretty much go on strike soon thereafter. It wasn't that they didn't live by the rules. They just had different rules. It was an industrial operation. Very immigrant workers. Very different than anything you'd find in the office worker component. So I learned a lot about organizing because even though I worked for a local, most of the contracts in the garment industry, I'm sure it's the same now, are master contracts. So there's almost no contract negotiation that happens at the local level. It's all about organizing. So that's what you do. You did organizing and grievances.

**So, in other words, there wasn't an election after they collected all those cards?**

You know sometimes we would have elections but more often than not, no. I may be condensing this memory a little bit but I remember it as either equally strikes and elections or...

**So you were striking for recognition, basically.**

Yeah. So that's what I did for them, and then I moved upstate for them and I was what they called a business agent but business agents still organized so I represented shops, did mostly grievances and organized. Did more things. A lot of great on the ground training. A lot of think on your feet training. Great home visit training. Really, a good, deep exposure to what it meant for people to join a union. Right from the beginning you're asking people to put their livelihoods on the line.

**Those were cases where people were risking their jobs.**

They usually lost them, actually.

**What did that feel like?**

You know the industry is pretty fluid. People tend to move from shop to shop anyway. So it wasn't a career disaster exactly, and people who were talented, good at what they did, could pretty much find work places. It was harder with the men who were--we did a number of knitting factories, and so particularly people who didn't speak English, those were harder jobs to replace.

**Did you have experiences as an office worker that helped you become aware that office workers should be organized?**

You know, no, I came, much like everybody else, out of the anti-war movement and a kind of political perspective and trying to somehow find the right combination of left politics and the institution of trade unions and see of what benefit they could be, see how those could be combined well.

**What about the women's movement? How did you feel about the women's movement? Had you participated in a lot of women's issues...?**

Yep. I would have said I was a feminist--I would still say I was a feminist. Organizations? I never was a big organization person. I tend to try to do things. I worked at the, oh boy, I'm not going to remember this, Every Woman's Center at the University of Massachusetts while I was a student. I actually got funded to do an office workers organizing project for them, probably in the mid-seventies. That must have been how I talked to Karen and Jackie also. Not 9to5, but pre-9to5 stuff, survey work, stuff like that. I would say I had what seemed to me, now it looks like a not very deep but fairly typical new left, feminist perspective on all of this. It seemed like traditional unions ignoring women was something that should be dealt with. Unions still looked like a viable mechanism for dealing with some issues around gender and class at that point.

**So you joined up with 925 after they became District 925?**

Yep, I got hired.

**You got hired...**

As one of the regional directors, I think they called us. Which was pretty funny because there were probably four of us, right, all together.

**So what region were you working with?**

I believe I was the Eastern region. Yeah, I'm pretty sure that's what region I was. And I was based in Philadelphia.

**OK. So before we enter into that story I want to ask you one more question about your background. Did you grow up with knowledge of workplace struggles, labor unions, anything? Describe your family background.**

My parents are very working class, very educated people. They are people who got propelled out of their class background by education. Mostly on the back of G.I. benefits from World War II. None of my grandparents had even a high school education and both of my parents went to college. So they were a generation that made a big jump. And they made it economically but not culturally. So I come from a family that's very kind of culturally working class. I always thought of my parents as FDR Democrats. Unions were just something that you needed. And they were a good thing. They weren't examined much. They weren't talked about a lot. My father was in a state employees union in Connecticut. My mother didn't work. There wasn't a lot of labor drama in life in the '50's and '60's. So I wasn't a part of any of that. I certainly knew things like you never crossed a picket line. I mean, just wouldn't even consider it, but I couldn't tell you how I figured that out or who told me that. It was just part of how I understood things.

**Could you describe in some detail one or more campaigns that were involved in – organizing campaigns with 925 that had exhilarating moments or depressing moments, something notable.**

Boy, there were so many of them.

**Well, if you want to start with the first one. If you remember it that way, it's fine.**

You know I don't remember the first one. Here's the one that comes to mind first, it's not the biggest, and it was an interesting campaign. We were in Syracuse, New York trying to look at

organizing Syracuse University. We had connected with a local women's movement; Kate Clinton, before she got famous, did a benefit for us. You know, it was like one of those things. Some women from a regional office of Equitable Life Insurance had called us and we ended up organizing them. A hundred women. Equitable was just instituting time management and moving towards pay for performance with numerical goals. It was very badly done. The guy who ran the office was not very smart. The office was under a great deal of stress for production reasons and they were really smart working class women from a working class town which had a big union tradition. So, a couple of them in particular, kind of leaders by personality, figured out they needed a union. This was all ridiculous and they called us. So we went and much to everyone's shock, we won. We must have had an election. I can't remember. I remember because the problem was we won, we must have had an election. That wasn't so difficult. What was difficult was trying to get a contract. Because it was one office of a hundred workers out of God knows how many.

**It was a big corporation.**

Huge. Huge. Huge. I mean it's probably been bought by somebody else by now, but at that point it was enormous. It was a great campaign because Service Employees actually really tried, SEIU really tried in that campaign to back us up. You know, to do both high level negotiations to the extent that they knew how to do that, and also to fund demonstrations at offices around the country to try and figure out how to do what amounted to a corporate campaign. This was very early, it must have been '82 or something, so that even the concept of a corporate campaign was still in formation. We eventually got a contract. It was a great campaign. It was a wonderful campaign. I really loved those women.

**And then?**

Right. Well, and then I think we got de-certified at some point after then.

**Didn't they close the office?**

They probably closed the office, right. I was just trying to remember what happened. It didn't have a happy ending.

**They closed the office. That's what I've been told, anyway.**

Although I think from the contact I had with the people on the organizing committee--I kept in touch with a lot of them through the '80s--nobody regretted that. Nobody thought it shouldn't have happened. They all found other jobs. In that way...but yeah, I think they probably did close. That's what they did because they couldn't de-cert. That's what happened.

**And of course, this in a way was what one of 925's original goals had been, to break into the private sector.**

Yeah, we never really wanted to organize universities. That was supposed to be where we learned how to do things, not where we stayed doing them.

**Did you actually do a campaign at Syracuse University, which is a private institution?**

It is a private one. No, we never got enough going to do a campaign. We had a committee for a while but we never got to election for sure.

**Did you live in Syracuse while this was happening or were you coordinating it from your regional spot?**

For quite a while, I didn't live anywhere. You know, I had an apartment in Philadelphia and I was never there. So from '81 to...when did I have my child, '87, I didn't really live anywhere. I mean I had my furniture places but I didn't live anywhere. I went wherever there were campaigns. So we stayed in Syracuse with a woman labor lawyer who let us live in her house. I believe we were flying between Syracuse and either Cleveland, where we were organizing Cuyahoga Community College, and the beginning of Seattle. That's where we were organizing the unit out there. Probably there was some Cincinnati thrown in there for good luck. That's where we lived in Syracuse. We stayed with this lovely woman, Mimi Satter, who is still there, still in labor law. Great woman.

**What was that like? Did you feel that was a cost involved with that? You were a classic itinerant...**

Yeah, we were like migrant workers. Yeah, there was a huge cost. I think it's one of the reasons that, however you count, the five or six of us who were the original people are in some ways so close is that that's who we lived with. I had a relationship at that point but it was really a long distance relationship for five or six years because that was the way I had to have it. I think it was good and bad. There's no other way to do that work and it allowed us to be immersed in the work as a whole. And to really, really, really--we really wanted this to happen. So to really do that, you know, kind of very wholeheartedly. I think there were costs kind of on the physical and psychic spiritual level. No one should spend that much time on airplanes. Really. You just can't do that.

**I often wondered how Karen Nussbaum did it.**

Yeah, no, it's really not good for you.

**Do you remember anything specifically about the kinds of tactics you used to organize in those campaigns? Because 925 has some reputation for using innovative kinds of tactics.**

So much of what was innovative then has become standard now and was developed in parallel by us and other campaigns. Here's what stands out for me. I think that we were incredibly organized, and on a systems level, which before computers was what made you or not. In a campaign where you couldn't keep everybody in your head, having systems that enabled you to track things and that concept of tracking things, while not new, I think we really had down to an art form. I think that we were *very good* at building relationships of trust and building committees and building committees that trusted each other. I think we were good at not having all the relationships come to the organizers but in fact be the beginning of what we hoped would be the worker organization later. We were intentional about that. You know, that's what we wanted to do. We wanted to have women to have more power over their work lives so we were pretty focused on that. And we were pretty young. None of us could have been older than 35 if we were that. I doubt it. We were either younger than or peers of the women we were organizing. And often they were as well educated as we were, or not, so we were organizing peers in some senses. I think we also saw ourselves as a part of the labor movement but building the new labor movement, so it gave us lots of room to think of trying new things. It gave us lots of ways to think about that. We didn't have an institution to protect. I mean, we were in the Service Employees and we had to watch for that and think about it, but in the way that local unions are rooted in a place and they have their local relationships and reputations and

current membership to think about, we didn't have any of that. We could pretty much do whatever we wanted. So, we took more risks because we hadn't built an institution to take into account yet.

**So at that stage you're saying most of your energy was going into organizing and not servicing?**

Almost all of our energy always went into organizing. (Laughing) I mean, you know we got to the point where we were servicing some people, but you know.

**Because the little bit I've gleaned from some interviews is that people, especially when the change happened in places, both in Cleveland and Boston, New England area, people felt a loss of that kind of servicing 925 provided as opposed to what the merged union provided. I'm sure they did, right. I actually didn't focus on servicing for a lot of my time there. I think I did more servicing when I had my first child, which must have been 1987. I had two years where I was executive director of the union and running more servicing operations and I think I thought about it a lot more then. We really saw servicing as organizing. We looked to our current members as contacts for future organizing. We understood that really you're so limited by what you could do in a particular workplace unless you built a movement. That's kind of how we thought about it. Plus we were so nice. We were just nice girls so we always wanted to help people, which leads to a lot of servicing. (laughing)**

**Do you remember any discussions in that leadership circle about feminism and union organizing and how to reach out to women who might not be ready for...**

Hmm.

**I know you didn't think of yourselves as a feminist organization exactly but...**

Right. Although most of us probably would have described ourselves as feminist. Not in those terms. I think...well, you know, at the extremely tactical level we had to do lot of work with our new hires about how they looked. (laughing) I remember dress up school. And, you know, kind of be clear with people about in order to be respectful to people you had to dress in a way that they recognized. All of that was a part of entering the conversation and that at that point kind of college feminist sartorial style (laughing) wasn't really what we wanted.

**You couldn't be too alternative in other words.**

No. I think we took very seriously the idea that this was feminist work and that inherently if we did this women would find their *own* way to whatever it meant to them. To be honest with you I don't remember very many explicit discussions. We were very busy doing things. We didn't talk a lot of theory, which was one of the things I loved about working with this group of people, is that the assumptions kind of worked and we could see it happening in the work. We were not a theory driven organization.

**Right. Right. Several have said that.**

It doesn't mean we weren't smart or didn't think about those things. It's more like they were, "That's fine, we get it." If you build a strong movement of women within the trade union movement eventually we'll take it over, which was definitely our goal, and that would be good for everybody, which was definitely our goal. But I think we also understood we'll see how this

works out. More people than I had spent more time than I would have ever committed in long theoretical discussions in NAM [New American Movement?] or various other organizations. So everybody in *that* crowd was pretty tired of it. I'd never been able to manage more than an hour or two of that without thinking, "Who are these people and what are they talking about, I don't want to be here." (Laughing)

**What can you say from your perspective about the kinds of trainings 925 provided for new organizers or officers of locals? Because that was one of its strengths, too, right?**

Yep. We were very serious about training. We really understood it as a part of building an institution and building a movement, which is that people had to be brought in. You had to create a sense of organization and group. You had to create an identity. And people needed skills and sometimes they didn't have them. They could either be concrete skills, kind of what your legal rights and obligations were, how a contract worked, or they could be group skills – how to work in a group, how to make a committee run, how to run a committee meeting, how to think about group decision making in those ways. We trained our organizing committees. We did a lot of training. I think we believed in the power of group. Training is a way of increasing the power of group.

**Were you involved in the summer schools?**

At Bryn Mawr. Didn't 9to5 run those?

**Oh, maybe it did.**

I certainly went. Every year I went. And we took union people. We took members. We took leaders to that.

**So 9to5 ran those. It was only, I guess, Karen...**

Karen did both. Karen was always in both.

**Until she left for government, right [in 1992]?**

That's right. So we definitely went every year and we took members. I don't remember how we selected what members or whatever but...

**Was that considered part of the training/group process, developing the idea of the union?**

Yes.

**What can you say about your own development as a leader in the organization? Did you feel like a leader? Do organizers feel like leaders? I don't know.**

You know...leader... The first way to answer that question is to contrast the experience I had with the garment workers and the experience I had with 925. So, talk about my own personal

development, which is within the garment workers. I was extremely fortunate because I ended up, by luck, in one of the few functional locals that was run by a woman, who was brilliant, Barbara Laufman. She was out of the shops and she ran that local like nobody's business. This was a smart woman. She really got the whole thing. She got her union. She got how to organize. I was so lucky. And I was exactly what she needed in some ways because I could do anything. I had a college education. I didn't have a family. I was pretty much on call 24 hours a day. I was very interested in new ideas. I was an interesting combination of fearless and stupid. I would really do anything pretty much. She really gave me a good grounding in organizing skills, how to work with people, how they built groups of people. But the gender dynamic in that organization was very difficult. Even though it was a women's union, it was run by men, and so that and the fact that I was a college kid, not from the shops, really meant that my capacity to be a leader in that organization was very short-circuited in a lot of ways. I could never figure out how to be respectful of the current leadership but assert myself at the same time. Some of that is probably because I was young. But some of it was gender related. And that just wasn't a problem in 925. It was a problem with SEIU. It was a problem facing out. But internally we all just *expected* each other to do amazing things. Leadership in the sense of people following you -- I don't really think about it that way. But leadership in the sense of capacity to move things, make things happen, take big ideas and go -- there was just lots of support and room for that. If I look back on it, it's amazing when I think about workplaces subsequent to that. There was no competition. We didn't like each other necessarily. There were varying things that happened between people in the group, but there was not competition for space, leadership, or predominance. There was really a very interesting and functional, from my point of view, team of people. So I think I was a leader in the sense that I ran a lot of things. And I wasn't afraid to make decisions and the organization supported me. So I think I got a lot of practice just doing things. (laughing)

**That's a big emphasis, "Do it." What can you say about the experience of men in 925? I guess there were men who rose to be chapter presidents and get on the E-Board and things like that.**

We must have had male organizers somewhere in there...a few.

**Was that something you discussed at all?**

I don't remember discussing it in terms of the membership. I remember discussing it or thinking about it in terms of particular male leaders who we were aware we had to make room for in the organization. Either they played a particularly important role or often, for example, in university organizing, there would be techs who were all males. You had to figure out how to get them comfortable with the union. I don't remember it being a big issue. It was sometimes an issue in affiliations. Where there would be male leadership and were we the right union and that question of were we a *women's* union was always hard for everybody, men and women, to kind of wrestle with. Mostly workers didn't want a women's union because that implied you weren't very powerful. We spent a lot of time being a "real" union, not a "women's" union. The men issues I remember were mostly SEIU issues.

**Relating to SEIU leadership.**



Where there were serious gender issues. There were serious issues with the institution, many of which got framed in terms of gender and certainly experienced by me and us in terms of gender. There were, it should be said, enormous numbers of SEIU leaders who were very supportive of us and outside of their gender interests really wanted to see this work and very excited by it. So it wasn't universal. But dealing with the institution of SEIU there was definitely a big gender problem.

**You're the first, I think, who has raised as clearly as you have this possible dilemma of being seen as a women's union. Can you say a little more about that?**

It was a source of great strength. That was who we were trying to organize. That was who we were. We were implicit if not explicit feminists. That's the design of the organization. You'd run right into it because these were people with real jobs. If they were going to get a union, they wanted a real union. They wanted a union that could take care of them. They wanted a union that could fight for them. We used the SEIU affiliation to build on that but a lot of employers used the women's union thing against us. I don't know how to evaluate how successful they were but it was certainly something we talked about, we had to deal with all the time with workers. They weren't so sure they wanted to be in a women's union. I don't mean they didn't like it.

**Even though they were women mostly.**

Yeah, because it implies less powerful. And also, we were new.

**All your visible leadership was women.**

Yeah, there was a bunch of young women, many of whom had never been office workers or union officials. There were a number of things that astute workers should have and did ask us. Like, "Do you guys know what you're doing?" (Laughing) Which were important questions actually. I think that sometimes in affiliation discussions or when we were nudging up against another union in an organizing campaign, I respected the workers who asked those questions a lot. I'm surprised as many people believed us as did, actually.

**What exactly is an affiliation discussion?**

One of the things that we did, it was a big SEIU tactic, was go to existing organizations that were often independent, not affiliated with an AFL-CIO union, and ask them to join, affiliate.

**You mean like some kind of employee association.**

Like the University of Washington in Seattle. That was an affiliation. There was a...

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**START of SIDE B, TAPE 2**

But they already have representation.

**Do you believe there are women's ways of organizing?**

Women's ways of organizing?

**Does anything about the values and tactics of 925, do you think, come from the organization being run and led by women?**

Yeah. I'm pausing only because I'm trying to think how I would characterize it. I don't think I would answer the question, "Are there women's ways of organizing?" directly with a "yes." I think some of what I've already referenced, building groups, the strength of the relationships, I want to use, it's a funny word to use, but the kind of cleverness of some of our campaigns, the way we framed issues and thought about them, was directly related to how many women were in the leadership of the organization. That expanded, as there were more members who were leaders also. It wasn't just the organizers. I don't think that those were things that campaigns run by men don't or can't do or that men are incapable of. I just think they are things that really developed well in this organization. I think the way, you referred to servicing before, but the way we saw our members and how, you know, how connected we were and how much we cared about them played a lot in our decisions. And again, I don't think that men who have worked in the unions don't have those characteristics or feelings in that sense but they were a strong part of how we thought about things. I bet partly combined with feminism, some of the things we were willing to take on were directly related to us as women.

**By "take on" you mean "areas"?**

Issues. I was just thinking about bargaining. And I also think, in ways I didn't understand at the time, kind of what was stacked up against us because of gender and how much we crashed through those barriers because we had to. I was in maybe a couple of very difficult negotiating sessions, one with a real pig of a lawyer, oh my God, for Cuyahoga Community College. And the other with the head of personnel for University of Seattle. These poor men just could not stand dealing with us. They couldn't stand our committee; they couldn't stand us. We had a job to do, right, which was get the contract. We thought about these things but looking back on them, I realize, in fact, they were actually humiliated from the beginning by having to meet with us. So I think those things are different, to *their* disadvantage, not ours.

**Can you remember some of the ways they actually behaved? Does it bear repeating even? I don't know.**

Well, you know, I don't know if I can remember specifics. Because I was always a woman in these situations and they were almost always men it's kind of hard to have a comparison. It's almost like I wish I'd sat in on somebody else's negotiations and watched it go differently. They tended toward hysteria (laughing) and histrionics and they would...

**Shout.**

Oh, they did a lot of shouting. They did a lot of shouting, to no avail. Here's a good example, actually. This is a good story. This is the University of Washington. The committee absolutely thought this entire thing up. I only did my part. An actual real issue for women, a real issue, was that on a very large campus, people have a hard time leaving their offices. They had decided to take the tampon and sanitary supplies machines out of the women's restrooms because they kept getting vandalized. This created a real live problem for many women because the campus was so big they couldn't leave their offices. It was one of our bargaining demands. Believe me, I couldn't have made that up. So the committee talked about it. We polled it. People decided that we wanted to do it. We'd kind of gotten over the fact that it was an unusual demand by the time we arrived at bargaining because we were used to talking about it, and we were all women, and we really didn't think that much of it. It so flummoxed the opposition when it went on the table they had to leave the room. They couldn't even have the discussion to begin with. They literally had to...

**They couldn't say the words.**

Well they had a really hard time with those words. And then they tried. They came back and they said they weren't going to bargain over toilet paper. And we said, "Well, there was always toilet paper in the rest rooms." We assumed it was in the men's rooms. We didn't really know. But, you know, this was a discussion about what does an employer provide, what are their physical circumstances. How big the buildings were, how there weren't drug stores everywhere. What were their obligations. What would make for a more productive workforce. And you know, we actually were able to have that conversation with a pretty straight face until they didn't. And then we realized we just were driving them nuts and so we talked about it forever. Every time we got in there, we just talked about it and talked about it. We drove them crazy. So there's a ...

**Kind of as a way to soften them up for other demands or...?**

They'd be saying something bad about wages and we'd go back to Tampax. I mean, you know, we just decided to use it to just drive them insane. Because they couldn't seem to figure out a way to say yes, which would have been the smart thing to do, right, if you think about it? They did say yes in the end, actually.

**I was about to ask.**

They did say "yes" in the end. Somebody figured that out.

**Now here you were East Coast but you were working in Seattle. So it was a national thing. You were everywhere.**

Yeah. I'd lived in Seattle a couple of years pretty much. I came back, went to other campaigns a little bit, but...

**Were you involved in some of the political campaigns they had to have in Washington to change the laws in order to do the full...**

After my time.

**That was after your time.**

Kim did that.

**OK. What do you remember about how 925 might have dealt consciously with issues of diversity, either in the workplace or in their own membership and leadership and all kinds, you know racial, ethnic, gender...**

Yeah. We did. We thought about it a lot. We were very focused on having, well actually one thing to say is that in a lot of union work and certainly in ours it made sense to try and have women of color in your central group for two reasons: 1) There tended to be existing, intact, and very trusting workgroups around issues of race. Particularly in a work situation where women of color were a minority, you needed to have leaders from that group in order to have that group. Just the way it worked. The other is they tended to be braver, smarter and get it more. So you tended to want them on your committees because they were people who understood this dynamic. Very generally speaking. So separate from an approach that says diversity is good, you know more cultural approach, there were very clear reasons that if you wanted to win an organizing campaign and you were organizing a multi-racial workplace that you dealt with it. We certainly thought about it practically and behaved in those ways. We worked hard to recruit organizers from lots of different kinds of backgrounds. We started trying to hire members as soon as we could. And I think we had mixed success with that. We had a lot of members of color particularly when we got to servicing. I think we had good success with that. We were able to actually kind of provide them with a job where they could live and some stability. Less luck with young women who had to travel all over the country. It was too hard.

**When did you leave 925?**

1989.

**1989. OK. So, you had that ten years or so.**

Yep.

**Did you consider 925 a family friendly organization? You'd had at least one child while you were an organizer.**

As an employer, you mean? Not in terms of what we did for workers. How we were with each other.

**Well, both.**

What we did for workers, absolutely. It was part of what we did, it was part of how we thought about it. What we did for ourselves, less. We didn't do so good with the issue of kids. The

question of part time work wasn't really well addressed. I think we all managed, but it's why I left. And that's not against what happened, but it's one of the primary reasons I left. I had a two year old and I could not travel. And we'd made some accommodations. I was living in Boston. I was there a lot more, but it just wasn't going to work. In other ways we were. I mean we were happy when we had children. We liked each other's children. We were supportive in those ways.

**You could bring them to meetings.**

Eh, you couldn't really bring them to meetings. I mean, you could but if you cared about what happened in the meeting you didn't bring your child because you can't really work that way. I mean it's one thing to be a member and a participant and bring your child. But if you're trying to run a meeting or pay attention to what's happening, having a young child there doesn't really, you know, work out. I don't think union work is family friendly. I think we ran into that. I think the long hours, the very large demands and the travel demands of a national union were really against us.

**And by that time when you had a two year old, did the core group, most of them had children?**

Karen did. And Anne did. Bonnie had hers after mine, had David after me, and Jackie never had kids. But we were definitely doing it.

**But it wasn't easy. A number of people have referred to union organizing as really a calling rather than a job. You're never off duty.**

Yeah, you're not. So Anne Hill is a good example of somebody, or Debbie Schneider, they made that work. They were more locally based than my work was and I think they were willing to work with the various trade offs, you know, that happened for them and their kids. I just couldn't see a way to make it work given what I did.

**OK, this is one I keep forgetting to ask. What other kinds of activism were going on in the community during your active time with 925 in the nation? Were there ways in which you were aware of it and it informed anything about what you folks were doing? Did you feel part of something bigger than the union movement? Or possibly it was just very all encompassing union work and that was it.**

Well, you know there was a lot happening in the '80s. I was somebody who was always aware of that. I think that it was very absorbing trying to build 925. I think trying to exist within and understand SEIU as a home union took a lot of work, so a lot of my time was spent trying to understand that, relative to the labor movement writ large and the organization itself. For me, I don't know if you can time this out, because my other home community is the gay and lesbian community, starting in the early '80's, all the men were dying. So there was a lot going on. Trying to deal with lots and lots and lots of death while I was doing this, and watching people in the union die, certainly is something I'm aware that was happening. I think that awareness is a little shadowed by that's what I did after I left the union. So, you know, it's kind of where I

moved into, was doing AIDS work. I know what was going on that we should have paid more attention to, not that it would have done our organization any good, but all the stuff that was happening internationally around the kind of questions of development and women in development certainly were very interesting things that we didn't have time to pay attention to. It would have been not relevant to our direct work. But they have become much more relevant.

**The seeds of globalization were definitely there.**

They were definitely there.

**I mean I'm sure everyone was aware of union busting and Reaganomics.**

Oh, that. That was part of our work. That was our work. I would consider that our work. If you're going to talk about what happened as a result of Reagan and the change in the '80s, those things relate to the fate of our union. Those were definitely the context we were operating in.

**You talked about the effort it took to really understand and work with SEIU as your parent union and the mostly men leaders in it. Can you say a little bit more about that? How did you experience that and what were some of the difficult parts? And the successful parts?**

SEIU was an organization that was undergoing a transformation itself into what it is now, which is not what it was when we were a part of it. We were a very bold experiment on their part, particularly John Sweeney's part. We were a risk and we were often a liability to him internally. My guess is we were defended far more often than I knew. What it felt like in the field was that nobody got it. The local unions were worried we were going to steal members from them. I think that a lot of what we watched was a union that had been powerful but very inwardly focused and just did its job, kind of a business union, transforming itself into a different kind of union. Since we represented the new, the resentment or what we dealt with had a lot to do with that as much as it did with us. Looking back on it, with good reason most of the men who ran big locals thought we couldn't do anything. We were some project of the International, wacky girls...

**So when you encountered the presidents of locals in the cities you were in...**

Some, not all.

**Not all but that was where some of the issues for you came up.**

Yes. And internally.

**Interact with them, and...**

Absolutely, deal with them, listen to them, you know, get their help in contracts or strikes. It varied. Mostly they came through. I don't remember any...Anne could probably say more about Cleveland, but I don't remember any places where we were actually sabotaged as opposed to not helped. In the International, there were difficult politics, as they would say, in the building.

Which were about gender, they were about personality, they were about who was going to have power ultimately. It was very clear that nobody wanted to take us seriously. They wanted us to be successful but they didn't want to take Jackie and Karen seriously. They kept trying to figure out how to do it halfway or not do it.

**What would it have meant from your perspective to be taken seriously.**

More money.

**Put more support behind the initiatives.**

Which maybe they couldn't afford to do. Now that I've had more experience in organizations, I don't know if I was sitting somewhere making those decisions what it would have looked like. You know, kind of writ large. And the decision to invest in Justice for Janitors instead of 925. I don't know if it wasn't wise on their part, because then the other tragic thing about us is we missed our moment. We started organizing office workers thinking we'd move into private industry on the wave or heels or something following the computerization of work and it made the work disappear. So we just got our historical moment wrong. You know we were trying to organize a sector that stopped existing pretty much. There weren't secretaries. There are no secretaries anymore. There are people who work in offices but they don't have that identity anymore.

**Do they have a clerical worker identity, do you think, or not really.**

Not much. No. And in terms of how we saw what computers were going to do, they just eliminated a lot of clerical jobs. They moved it into professional jobs in other ways. I don't mean there aren't women stuck in low wage work or "drony" work. It's just the sector we were trying to organize completely transformed and a lot of it disappeared. So how we thought of the work, what we thought about the organizing part, had a very clerical, secretarial base to it, and that disappeared from work life so, I don't know. Maybe we should have done waitresses. I don't mean that, because they don't work for big firms but we also were dealing with a changing economy in a way that I don't think... It's why we got stuck in universities. That's where that didn't change.

**This is a related question then. Were the aims of 925 realized?**

No. (Laughing) We wanted to build a national office workers movement. I don't believe we did that. Actually, we wanted to build a national working women's movement and we were going to use this as the springboard was our goal. But I think we did much more than we could have realistically hoped to do when we set out. You know, I think actually organizing what it ended up by the end, a hundred thousand people, kind of being part of the changing consciousness around women and work. Particularly, I think we played a significant role in making union membership much more acceptable to women. We really were a big part of that in a way that was very positive for all concerned, particularly the trade union movement and women. I think we developed women leaders and leadership within SEIU that are still evident and valuable

today. We succeeded on a lot of fronts. I do look at us more defeated historically and by lack of investment than anything else.

**In various ways, you've really addressed this question but I want to ask it again anyway. What did the experience of working with 925 mean in your life?**

You know, it was so central it's almost hard to answer that question. That was my life for those years. It's still a huge part of my identity. You know, it's increasingly challenging to have an identity as somebody who's a trade unionist in this environment, just kind of given what's become of the American labor movement. But I still think of that. What I learned about the power of an idea and of people working together probably could have been learned in a lot of places but I learned it there and is completely central to how I look at things. I'm forever grateful. For me, an opportunity to work all over the country with all those different kinds of women in those different situations, it was a wonderful, wonderful thing.

**Just a couple of more questions –**

**END of SIDE B, TAPE 1  
START of SIDE A, TAPE 2**

**You left 925 in '89.**

The end of '89.

**Do you want to say a little bit about the work you did after that? And then I'll ask you to talk about the work you're doing now.**

I left 925 and went to work for the AIDS Action Committee, which was the large New England AIDS advocacy and service organization, and I worked there until 2002. It was my next phase in my life as an activist. I went there as the director of administration and finance and became the deputy director running the organization so that the director could run the politics. And that's what I did.

**I think that's one of the places I remember your name, now that I think about it, from those mailings or whatever.**

Give us money, give us money, give us money!

**Public relations. Was that organizing work primarily that you did for them?**

No, the organization did enormous amounts of organizing work. My particular job was management. I managed the organization, the money and the people. A kind of internal organizational strategy.

**So what was the connection between the kind of work you had done with 925 and that kind of organizational management?**



Well, when I was executive director, the last two years when we were trying to figure out how to have me work here, I was the elected treasurer and the executive director. So I ran the organization. I mean it was probably about a two million dollar organization and so I ran the budgets, the people, and that kind of stuff. Those skills translated well enough for the size that AIDS Action was at that point. You know there's nothing like bargaining contracts in a lot of situations to help you be a good human resources director. I saw more bad employers in my ten years and learned more things that employers shouldn't do. It really set me up well to run an organization that had about 40 people when I started and I think about 150 when I left and about 2,000 volunteers. It was a pretty good organization. We built a great--I'm still very proud of it--we built a great HR function there. And the work of the organization was organizing, so in my job as deputy director I helped form and think about strategy. Almost all of what we did related. It was community organizing in a different way but it was trying to figure out how to connect people to an issue and get them to take action one way or the other, either in their personal behavior or in their advocacy.

**Right. Right. And tell us about what you're doing now in this job at the center.**

I have a similar job. I kind of manage the operation. It's a much smaller operation. This is an organization that's part of the management school of Boston College. We do applied research and study how people inside particularly very large corporations are trying to understand and implement corporate social responsibility and corporate community relations. So we do research projects that study that and attempt to draw from it things that can be taught or shared in a way that improves that practice. You know, if you want to circle back to the beginning of 925 and what you were saying about the '80s, capitalism won. Discussion's over. Whether we like it or not, it is ascendant as an economic and political form, and I'm now working with very large organizations organized around those principles trying to figure out if the boat can be turned a little bit. Because it is a self-destructive system and I would rather it didn't manage to destroy the whole world. (Laughing). Actually. And many, many, many smart people inside it see that. Not in the same terms I would, obviously. Its capacity for only measuring short-term value, and, you know...And the nation states are pretty much going to atrophy as decision makers, and these corporations are really going to take the place of nation states. So, it would be a good idea to understand what goes on in them, it seems to me.

**So are you the Associate Director?**

Yes.

**And describe in a little more detail what your work is here as Associate Director.**

Budget, HR. What my staff does is work with corporations. We have a large study project which we're about to announce in February which has been with ten large global corporations looking at how internally they align their corporate responsibility ideas with their business strategy or don't. How those things line up. We're trying to move the CSR [corporate social responsibility] out of either reporting, which is pretty passive and externally focused, or giving away money, philanthropy, into how the businesses are run. How they think about their business,

how they evaluate things. Many people in the field refer to it as the triple bottom line, so instead of just looking at shareholder value, you'd look at shareholder value—you'd also look at who shareholders are—in a slightly different way. You look at sustainability; you look at civic society, and you kind of measure on those three dimensions, not just a short-term stock price.

**So who are your allies in these corporations that you approach to develop these relationships?**

This center was originally the Center for Corporate Community Relations. We have a home base in people who run community affairs and foundations by and large. But our kind of newer target audience are people who are responsible for corporate social responsibility. They have varying titles. They're in governmental affairs. Sometimes they're the VP of CSR. Depends. They can be stakeholder relations, stakeholder investor relations, governance. So that's lots and lots of people thinking about how the businesses intersect with the civic universe and how that plays either for the corporation or overall.

**Are there research and advocacy initiatives like yours at other universities and around the country?**

Some business schools are looking at this. This is pretty unique. We're not as integrated into the curriculum here as we would like. We tend to work externally. We work with people in corporations, not students. Michigan and Haas (?) have pretty strong student-based programs, kind of in their MBA programs.

**Finally, do you feel optimistic about what this kind of initiative can contribute to empowering employees or, I don't know what it would be, improving society?**

It doesn't want to empower employees. That'd be a really good idea. Do I feel optimistic about it? I am optimistic about the people I've met and how smart they are and what they *want* to do. I think it's too early for me to really give an evaluation of the work. I think it's too early. I think the intentions are good but that the work is by and large sidelined off of mainstream business thinking. We need to see if we can get it into it and what happens before I would make an evaluation. Just from me, my choices, it's what I think. I think capitalism has won. I am trying to figure out and this may or may not be the right place to do it, so in that situation, what's your next strategy. I'm not sure what I think. I'm actually trying to gather information to think about it.

**The way you're talking implies that you do really see some continuity between your other kinds of work...**

I do see continuity. Yeah, I feel like I try to construct a work life that has been aimed at creating more possibility of justice in the world. And I've had three very different purchase on that, some by luck, and some by choice of I like to learn new things. AIDS was a very different way to look at the world than trade unionism. This is a very different way than either of those things and it's good for me. It keeps my brain awake. I think the trade union movement certainly would teach us this, which is that if you stay in one movement and you only talk to each other, things get very

stale and you miss the point (laughing) entirely. You become very self-concerned and self-focused. And you shouldn't. An organization should not have the same goals ten years from when it starts. It should transform and that would be some of the fate of the trade union movement, it hasn't been so good at changing, from my point of view. And too many men. (Laughing)

**Or at least men who have a certain way of exercising leadership. (Overlapping)**

You know, returning to what we said about what was different about 925 and I was saying there was no competition. You know what there really was, there was no ego. Not that none of us...we had egos. Nobody had ego needs in that organization. And you look at even the most recent split of the AFL and you just think, "Oh, my God, what is the matter with these people." There were so many solutions that were possible to that, that weren't this, that were prevented by the personalities of the people, who were by and large men, involved in these discussions. Ego played an enormous role in that. It's just really an impediment and I think men have a hard time seeing that, to be honest with you. That's a generalization. It's not true of all men, but if you're going to talk organizationally I would say that's a huge difference.

**Anything more you want to add about the legacy of 925? You've been very articulate.**

No, it's a great organization.