Gilda Turner
Interviewed by Ann Froines
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SEIU 925 in Seattle

Starting out, tell me the story about how you entered 925. What made you get involved at the beginning, go to that first meeting?

Actually, I was working in the hospital as an employee who is not in the union. I was classified. I was not in the union. But I did a job where we did schedules, but we also did the timesheets; we had to process the timesheets, for the payroll department for the nursing department, and that was the department that we also did schedules for. So in the process of doing that, we had to administer the contracts that were in the hospital for the nurses, for people who were in 925, and for people who were in the other union, AFSCME. And this was in Cincinnati, Ohio, at the University of Cincinnati. So we were really familiar with the contracts, and which one was the best contract. They started doing some cutting back, and other things in our department, and we decided that we probably needed to be unionized. Because they came in, they cut half of the people out of our department, and they cut all the people who had been there the longest. They did not go by seniority; they didn't do anything that was fair. And then they hired a person over the nursing department, and it was clear that she came in, you know, to chop heads. So we felt like there were going to be more cuts, so we'd better get ourselves under a contract so we'd have some protection. So we *knew* that 925 had the best contract. We didn't want to be a part of AFSCME. And so we called them, and an organizer came out, and signed us up. But we had to have an election. There were only nine people [laughs]. We had to have an election. And that's how it started. And then I got on the--

This is in the '90s? Or '80s?

This was in 19...Let me think. I started working here in '97. So it was probably like 1995.

OK, so then you had your little chapter of the—

No, we joined in with the larger chapter. There were like maybe 300 people in the hospital belonging to this chapter, and we were part of that larger chapter. So then I became active, I became a steward, I was elected for the negotiating team and stuff like that.

But it was short-lived, my membership, because then the hospital privatized. It wasn't too long after we joined the union that the hospital privatized. And they did it in a real sneaky way. The order was on the governor's desk to privatize, and someone sent an anonymous fax to our office, to our then-president, Debbie Schneider. She got it, read it, realized it was—was trying to find out if it was true or not, and then she released it to the press. So that kind of put a halt on the privatization. It was in all the newspapers. It was a big

uproar. This is the only public hospital in Cincinnati. This is where all the indigent land, and people who didn't... A lot of welfare people use that as their primary care because they don't have doctors. Poor people come there that won't be accepted at any other hospital because they don't have insurance. Plus it was connected to the university, so it was also the university teaching hospital.

So because of our union, the privatization got held up for about a year, year and a half. And these coalitions formed, and we did all this stuff to try to keep the hospital from privatizing. We were not successful; they did eventually privatize.

Does that mean the union was automatically kaput, or did they have to continue dealing with a union?

Well, they had to continue dealing with us, but we had to renegotiate our contract because it was with a different provider, a different employer. But what they did was, they renegotiated the contract, and then in about...I guess they did wait a year. I guess they did wait a year from the privatization. They set up some employees, some new employees. You know, they had to hire all new employees, because all of our employees used their bumping rights, and bumped to the university. So you took a unit that was over 300 people, by the time everybody bumped out--everybody who could, bumped to another position--we only had about 70 members left there. So it was slim pickings. And we bargained a contract for those 70 people.

Well, they waited until they could file for a decert, when the...And they did that. So they filed a decert, you know, the union...and of course, we didn't have any of the old, loyal members there—they were gone. We only had a handful. All of rest of the people were new. They hired them, putting in their heads that the reason they could only pay them a certain amount of money was because they had a union. And in some areas, I mean I had people actually tell me in confidence that they were told that if the union came in, they would lose their job. Oh, no, that's a different bargaining unit—I take that back. No, people in *that* bargaining unit said that they were all told that the reason they couldn't be paid more money was because of the union and all this kind of stuff. The university had actually given the list of employees to two of these new people who had gone out and gotten people to sign the thing for the decert. Some of them didn't even know what they were signing; some of them did. And then they had an election, and they won.

So the university kind of organized the decert.

They organized it. They even paid for their attorney. These people had an attorney, a high-priced attorney, like up in the Krueger building, way up on the 29th floor floor or something, something that just two ordinary people couldn't afford out of their pockets for a decert, you know what I'm saying. So it was very clear, yes, that the university—

Who was running that.

Yeah, they had orchestrated the whole thing. And people fell for it.

And then what did you do after that, since you were working there?

Well, I had already left. As soon as I knew that they were privatizing, around about that... even before we finished negotiating the contract--what do you call the contract when you're negotiating? Oh, the word won't come to my head. It's like when you're changing employers and you can do--impact bargaining.

Oh, OK.

Yeah. So we were doing impact bargaining. In the course of that, Debbie had pulled out a little flyer. She said, you know, "Pass this around to the members," because there's a position open. Am I getting confused? No, it must have been our regular negotiations, but we were still doing impact bargaining because we knew that they were planning on privatizing.

A lot was going on at that time.

A lot was going on, yeah. A lot was going on.

That was when you made the move *into* the union?

That was when I made the move into the union. She gave me that, and I said, "OK, I'll pass this around," but I got right up from my desk--I had already had my resume typed up —it was on the good paper and everything. Because I was planning on getting up out of there. Because there was no reason for me to stay.

You know, my original intent had been to stay there 20 years and retire. They offered a benefit that your children could go to college, and all you had to pay for was books. And once you lost your state retirement, you lost all of your sick leave, because they changed the way sick leave was calculated. It was really bad.

It was a really negative impact.

It was a negative impact. They were privatizing, and then hooking University Hospital up with four other hospitals that were private, and calling it The Healthcare Alliance. It was like the really, really rich hospital, the private hospital that rich people went to, but they were going bankrupt. And it's like all of the resources from the public hospital were getting infused into...you know, people told me they were moving machinery out of there, and all kinds of stuff. You know, they really just brought that hospital down. They really did. And so, no, I had no reason to stay there.

What were you hired as? What was your first job with SEIU?

As a organizer.

Had you had any experience as an activist or organizer before this?

Not *really.* Not really. I had belonged to the hunger coalition, and marched in marches. I had belonged to the NAACP and things like that, and I had belonged to non-profit organizations and did things, for a good cause and that kind of stuff. But not anything really like organizing.

OK. You've alluded to this already—some of your own experiences as an office worker and the lack of respect given office workers for their work, by talking about the privatization. Do you have any other stories from your experiences as an office worker about the need for a union, and how office workers were treated?

Well, you know, most of the time that I worked at University Hospital was a good experience. This didn't happen until the end. The hatchet woman that came in, she got rid of our supervisor. The woman that we had worked for initially, she was really good, she was really fair. She let us do anything we wanted. She let us work flex time. There was two women who had had babies; she let them share a position, she let them job-share. She was like really innovative. She didn't care when you worked, she didn't care if you came in the middle of the night and did your work. As long as you were there to do payroll on Mondays, you were there on the day that the paychecks came out, so that if people had problems, they could come down and talk to you, and you could fix it. And as long as you were accessible to your head nurse, and you got your schedules out on time —those were her requirements. As long as no head nurse was calling her up or knocking on her door, saying that they couldn't find you, or you didn't have your schedules done, or whatever, your work was messed up, as long as she wasn't getting any phone calls or knocks on her door, she didn't care what you did or when you did it.

She trusted you.

She trusted us to do our work. She treated us like professionals. So we didn't have any problems in the office then. And if Sharon had stayed there, we probably never would have gone for a union. We didn't do this until they got rid of Sharon. I mean, they really screwed her over because she had worked there since she got out of nursing school—she had worked there for almost 30 years! And she had run the whole department. She had actually been doing the job that the hatchet lady was hired into. She did all of her same work. And so, she told her it was between her and the woman who ran the float pool. Well, the woman who ran the float pool just knew Sharon was gonna get it, she had all the experience, she had the Master's degree, she had everything. Nancy had even brought boxes in to pack up her office, and they got rid of Sharon, kept Nancy.

Well, we knew we didn't want to work for Nancy. Yeah, we knew we didn't want to work for Nancy. She always told Sharon, "I don't know why you let them work like that. How do you know when they're supposed to be here?" So we knew, with her for a supervisor, we needed to get some [laughs]--some help! We need some kind of protection, something on our side. And that was another deciding factor on belonging to the union.

But no, I've worked in other offices where I was targeted to be fired because I was African-American. And you know, I just had to do office politics to keep from getting fired. But at the same time, I just got out of there. But I knew what was happening. She fired the Jewish woman first, then she started after me, just for no reason. It certainly wasn't because of my work, because I was doing more work than any of the other coordinators in our office. It was just crazy.

She identified you maybe as a union leader?

No, this was in another job where I didn't even have a union. Those were the only two clerical-type jobs that I had at the University Hospital and then for a private nursing company. Before that, I worked as a social worker, in a community health center, which I really, really loved. But it just didn't pay any money. And I was a single mother with three children, a divorced mother with three children, so I needed a job that paid more.

And obviously that--

That had better benefits.

--benefit of the college education was important too.

Yeah, not that any of my children ever used it. My daughter decided to go to a private college. [laughs]

How did you feel about the women's movement? You got involved in the '90s in SEIU, but 925 was kind of a women's union.

I *loved* that. I really liked that. You know, I'm a lesbian, and there was this woman who wanted to interview me, and she asked me about being a feminist, you know, and I was just, like, taken aback. I was like, "I don't know if I'm a feminist or not. I don't really.." You know, I didn't really identify with a bunch of white women on TV taking their bras off and burning them. You know, that was not my experience, and so I didn't really identify with that.

But as the interview went on...she was interviewing lesbian mothers for our—Cincinnati Inquirer, our main paper in the city. And the article was in there. And she came to the house, she talked to me, she [saw/talked with] my partner, she [talked with] our children. But when she asked me about being a feminist, I was just like, "Well, I don't know that I am," you know, a feminist. But as we continued the conversation on, and she really identified what she saw as being a feminist, then I kind of had to agree, "OK, well, maybe I am."

But I always associated it with...it was *only* white women you'd see on TV, and they'd be talking about burning their bras and I guess equality at work and all that. Well, you know, black women have been fighting for equality at work, everywhere, you know, their whole lives, so I never really took on that label of being a feminist. I've always been a

independent, outspoken person. My mother was that way. She raised me to be that way. But I never equated that with feminism or being a feminist. I never—

You would've been that way if there hadn't been a women's movement.

Probably.

Growing up, did you have any knowledge or opinions about labor struggles, union struggles, experiences?

Oh, my dad was a member of CWA for...he worked for the telephone company for, like, 37 years or something, in Cincinnati. The older I became, the more I realized that it was probably really because of the union that he was able to *have* a job, as a black man, and keep it that long. He started as a ditch digger, you know, the year that I was born, and he worked that--that was the only--you know, he worked that job his whole life. That was the job that he worked. And then he moved up to different positions. But I know that my father is a outspoken man, also. He's a quiet man, but he will not be quiet in the face of injustice. I know that he was a union steward. And I know he had to represent some of his co-workers in grievances with the bosses.

While you were growing up, you picked up on this?

While I was growing up. They were all white, and he was...most of the workers...oh, no, that's not true, because some of them were white. You know, the guys who drove the trucks with intallation and stuff, most of them were white. And the guys who dug the ditches and did the other work, most of them were black. So. And so then when my father got a promotion to drive a truck with the telephone poles on it, you know that was a big thing, because most of the men who had done that previously had been white men.

And maybe you're saying the union might have had something to do with that, in the sense that he had seniority, and he was in line for that?

Well, I'm saying that the union had a lot to do with him even probably having a job for 37 years, as a black man, working. The fact that they *had* a union and they *could* file grievances, and they couldn't just fire them without due process because they did have a union and a union contract. Because I'm sure there were times when my father spoke out that, if they didn't have one, you know, that...He is not a person who would ever refuse to do his job, but I'm sure there were times when he spoke his mind, and said some things that probably ruffled feathers.

Sure, and where Cincinnati is located, there's a certain amount of southern—

Yeah, Cincinnati is a racist place. It's still racist. It has not changed a whole lot [laughs] in my lifetime.

Did your Mom also work outside the home? I presume she did.

Yes.

Did she have any union?

No. The first job my mother had, she worked in a paper-bag factory where they made brown paper bags, the kind you have in a grocery store. And then that factory closed down, and she got a job at the Cincinnati Club, which is a private club/hotel, at that time, for white people. I don't even know if there's any black people who belong to it now. That's where she worked.

Was it kind of like for visiting businessmen, that kind of thing?

There were people, no, who actually belonged to it. It was the Cincinnati Club, it was a club. Yeah. And it was all white people. And she worked there as the valet.

Please describe in some detail a particular campaign that was important to you in your days with 925.

Well, they were all important in different ways. The very first thing that I did, you know, they sent us to Boston to work on organizing ABCD. Are you from Boston?

Yes, I know what that is.

So you know what that is. So, and the campaign...we lost it. If we had just organized the Head Start, we would have won, because the Head Start workers had issues, and they supported the union. It was an ugly campaign and it was a long one. They pulled the anti-union tactics—you know, they did everything they could to defeat it. What really lost it for us was the fact that they included the whole agency in, and the people in the—

There were educators there, too, right?

There were social service people, community planners, there were all kinds of people with higher degrees. The majority of them just didn't feel like they needed a union. So there was more of them in numbers than there were Head Start workers. So they went back and forth—Head Start, whole thing, Head Start, whole thing. Then they decided to go for the whole thing, and so we lost it. So then I came back to Cincinnati.

But while we were in Boston, the Head Start convention was in Boston, and we decided to have a booth there. And so we did, and handed out flyers and stuff. And there were actually some Head Start workers from Cincinnati who filled out a card and said they wanted more information [chuckles] about a union. So Debbie called me in Boston and said, "Well, when you get done there, you need to come back here because there're some Head Start workers here who want to organize a union." So I came back home, and organized that Head Start.

Now, were your kids grown up, at this point? Did you take them with you?

Oh, no, no, no, my kids were grown then. No, this was not a job I could have ever done with small children. People in SEIU do—people who work in the International have small children, like during the summers and stuff sometimes they take them with them. I don't know how they do it—it's not something that I would've been able to do. But no, my children were all grown and my daughter was in college. Right now, my children are 40, 35, and my daughter's 31. So yeah, the boys were grown, and my daughter was in college, so I was good to go.

You had some freedom.

Yeah, my parents were sick, so I used to pray, *Don't let anything happen to them while I'm traveling,* because both of them had donated their bodies to science, so if you weren't just right there, once they take them, that's it—you don't see them anymore. I used to pray for them, and I was lucky that I was there when both of them passed. But other than that, no, I didn't have any...

So, anyway, you came back to Cincinnati to work on a Head Start campaign?

Yeah, to work on that Head Start. So in a lot of ways, I guess that was the most important campaign for me because it was when I *really* learned organizing. We didn't have very good leadership on the ABCD [chuckles] organizing campaign, and when the first woman who was leading the campaign, when they decided, I guess, that she wasn't doing a good job or whatever, then they brought in another woman, Maureen. But they got Maureen right at the end. So it wasn't a whole lot she could do; she did the best she could do, but basically, the numbers were just against us, so...

What kind of tactics did you use for organizing Head Start in Cinicinnati?

In Cincinnati, well, then I got a training from Debbie Schneider, and Debbie Schneider taught me organizing the old-fashioned way. The International, the way they organize now, they send in a million organizers, they all go out and get cards, and they file right at 30%—they don't even wait till they have a majority. And then they keep workin' it, and then they end up winning. They figured out a science to it. But I was taught organizing the old-fashioned way, where you made a committee; you met with that committee; you educated them about organizing and what needed to be done to make it happen, and then you trained your committee to go out, talk to their co-workers, get the cards, sign them up, whatever, whatever. And then you file for your election when you had about 65% in cards, to make sure, because you knew 10% was going to fall off.

So that's what you used, the approach at Head Start?

Yeah, that's the approach I used. With Head Start. With all of them that I organized. I organized, I think, four Head Starts and one library in four years. Because the first year I was in Boston most of the time. So in four years I organized four Head Starts and one

public library. In Greene County.

What would you say you learned from this whole experience doing the Head Start organizing? Can you remember your own development as an organizer?

Yeah. Yeah. Because you know, initially, you're kind of shy, yourself, in going out. And people tell you, "Well, no, I'm not interested in the union," you just go, "Well, OK." [laughs] And so I went out last week with one of my child care providers, and we were going house visiting. So we went to this lady's house, and she said, "Well, you know, I support the union and everything, and I've been meaning to send my card in." "Well, you know, can we talk to you about it now for a few--?" "No, I don't have time now," you know, "The kids are asleep and my assistant's coming, and then I need to jump in the shower," and blah-blah-blah, "before more kids come." So she's just talking, talking, talking. And so the provider, well, she was just ready to go, and I said, "Well, you know what? While you're talking, we can go over this card, you can sign this card, and we can be gone before your assistant gets here. Because it'll only take a few minutes." And she said, "Well, OK, come on in." So we went on in, she signed the card, she talked to us, she told us about how she had lost her license and all this kind of stuff. We were down there probably about 30 minutes and her assistant still hadn't gotten there. And she gave us a check; she even gave us a check for extra money, just to help out on the campaign, just whatever. Then we left.

So we got outside, and Regina says, "Well, she said no, she wasn't gonna talk to us, and you just talked us right on in the door, got the card, got the money and everything!" And I just laughed, and I said, "Well, I've been doing this a long time, Regina."

But I just think about when I first started, and how a "no," you know, you would just kind of... And now, how you don't even... You know, people say, "No," and you acknowledge it, and then you just keep talking. And most of the time, you can prevail if they really want the union. You know, sometimes people throw up little roadblocks, but most of the time, if you can meet them on some common ground somewhere, find out what it is *they* need, or what's going on in *their* lives, and you can relate the union to that, then you can prevail with them.

When did you start this organizing campaign now in Seattle for child care providers?

We in actuality started this in earnest last summer. We had our first blitz, like the first week of August, last year.

And you had come out here especially to work on that?

No, I actually came out here to work on the New Strength in Unity plan.

Tell me about that.

That's Andy Stern's brainchild of unions in SEIU, there's a lot of little small unions, organizing the same kinds of people in one place, and they need to merge together and form bigger unions organizing the same kind of people. And then, after that happens, now we're in the point where he wants people to go to—what's the word for it—where everybody's bargaining. You know, like right now, we're doing it here. We have a lot of K through 12 workers, and so they're trying to bargain all their contracts at the same time, they're trying to get to where they're bargaining the—there's a word for it. Where, they're bargaining all the K through 12 contracts at the same time. So we're trying to do that here. It's not "consolidate a bargaining unit," but my mind won't let me think of it.

I'll find out the word. I should know that. I've heard it, but I can't think of it, either.

Anyway, so that's another part of his plan, so--yeah, I was actually—

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—was, that we would break up. Because we were the--

You'd have to give away some people.

We were the national local, and we would break apart as District 925 as we knew it, and Seattle would become Local 925 because we were the largest. We had almost 5,000 members at the University of Washington, and four other smaller locals merged with us here. And then in Ohio, they merged with 1199, Ohio, Kentucky, West Virginia. And in Boston, they went with...I don't know, some union who has now gone to another union.

Yeah, well, I think some of them just became SEIU locals, right?

All of them went with other SEIU locals, yeah.

OK. I guess I interrupted you in talking about your Head Start campaign in Cincinnati. But then I got to thinking about *this* campaign that's up there on the wall.

What do you think is different about 925's approach to organizing, from other unions?

I think that the main problem that they seem to have with organizing now is they organized unions, and then, when they get to the bargaining phase, it's really hard to get the contracts. It's hard to keep union support. It's hard to keep...It seems to be that the membership are not necessarily...bought into the idea of the union, because they didn't organize with a committee, their co-workers didn't organize them; they just sent a bunch of organizers out, you know, on a blitz, on a house visit, to sign people up on cards and...

Yeah, I see what you're saying.

Yeah. So that people aren't totally bought into the idea that—

They don't feel they own their own union?

Right. Right.

And you think 925's trying to have a different approach?

Well, at that time, when we were organizing, we were not organizing that way. The only time that we really had International organizers come in, I was organizing...it was the third Head Start that I was organizing, it was a county Head Start. And so that educational center did all of the Head Starts that were in Butler County, it's a pretty big area. And not even just in Butler County—no, it was Hamilton County. It was in Hamilton County. Cincinnati Public is in Hamilton County. But all the other school districts that were in Hamilton County, they did the Head Start. They oversaw the Head Start. Educational service centers. So, you just said, Cincinnati's very racist. There are parts of Cincinnati where no black people live. On that west side, going out toward the Indiana border. And like up in North Bend and some other towns up there, no black people live there, and the Ku Klux Klan is still actively operating. Those are not places I could go. When we tried to send their own co-workers up to that area, they would not talk to them—they wouldn't let them in the door. There was one white girl and one black girl tried to go up in Harrison and talk. Wouldn't talk to them. So, I told Debbie, I said, "Now you're gonna have to get some white people to come in here. [laughs] And go out here." Because I had signed up all the black people. All the black people in the agency had signed union cards, including the women in the office. But those white Head Start workers in those white Head Starts? So, we got some...

And that did make a difference?

Oh, yeah. They sent down this little girl...her name was Rhonda Greenhall, or something like that. Boy, and she went on over there in Norwood and out in Harrison and out in Western Hills. And she got them together. They had the issues, you know. It seemed to be a pretty racist organization in that African-American women seemed to have more issues than the white women did. But the white women got it. They signed cards. And evidently they voted, because we won about 75% or something, and everybody voted. Because the employer rented buses to drive people to the polls; they made sure everybody voted. So we had like huge turnout. And we still won by 70 something percent.

And it was the funniest thing. At the victory party that night, all these white people came. We had never seen them. They had never come to any other thing before. No union meetings, nothing. We even had union meetings out in their area. Nobody came. But they all showed up for the party. And it was great! It was great.

And you stayed with that union for a while, right?

This is 925 in Cincinnati.

Did you see any of the sort of racial barriers coming down in that union?

They were. They came on out, and you know, I leave after the organizing, but then the rep took over. That unit's still standing. It's still standing, they're still working together—you know, the white women and the black women. And they were very, very divided when I came in there. But that kind of healed some of that, and they started pulling together and working together. And I still hear from some of them from time to time. They still e-mail me, or they'll call me and say, "Oh, I just wondered how you were doin'."

As an African-American woman getting so active in SEIU organizing, what was your perception of SEIU? And I guess I should say 925, that's what we're talking about. Dealing with "diversity issues."

I've always felt that—

[interruption]

. . . your perception as an African-American woman about the kind of awareness of racial and ethnic issues in the labor force and in union organizing in 925.

In our union it really has not been a problem. In the Boston office, I don't think there were any African-American people except, for some reason, I think the admin person was. The admin person was African-American, but there were only like four people in that office. Yeah, I think about four people.

And then in the Cincinnati office there were only four people. Two of them were African-American. And then, in the Cleveland office, there were maybe a few more people there...maybe five people, but I know there were two African-American people. So, yeah, they were very conscious of that, and aware of that.

Here Kim is always trying to hire African-Americans. You know, our staff has really *grown* since we did this merger, and because we got staff from the other unions that have come in. But she still tries to be aware. Right now we had an Asian rep, but he left. And so I know that it's a slot that she would like to fill. I know she would like to have another African-American organizer; they just tried to hire one, but she went with a different union. So I know that's something that they're always looking at and they're aware of. And there's a diversity committee among the bargaining units, the members, who come together and talk about...Oh, actually, we're having a training on diversity issues at our next staff meeting on the 23rd. So it's something--

Have you been participating in those?

I have not. The very first meeting that they had, I was not able to attend. I imagine that I will attend some of the future ones.

I guess some of it just has to do too with the makeup of the labor force in these respective cities. Until recently, Boston's had a small percentage of people living and working in Boston properanyway, who are people of color. Compared to a place like Cleveland, for example.

Uh huh.

When you were campaigning with these different groups for--primarily Head Start, do you think any of the women felt their jobs were at risk? And what was it like working with, trying to involve women in an organization and an effort that might put their jobs at risk? Given that these women really needed these jobs and everything.

At the first job, the women were not afraid. At the first site, the women were not afraid. At the second one that I organized, they did target some people, and they harassed them a little bit, but they stood up to it.

On the third one, they really, really harassed, this one African-American woman. And they decided that she was the one who started the organizing, and she really was not. When she came to the first meeting, we were afraid she was a spy, and she was really anti-union. And she came clearly with her agenda that, you know, "Why are they organizing, and why do they think they need a union?" She was very negative at the first meeting. But we eventually won her over, and she ended up being the strongest leader, and ended up being president after they... But it didn't start out that way, but they clearly targeted her, thinking that she had started it and she was... She *did* end up being the leader. Because she had the vision; she totally got it. And she's still active with the union. I saw her in San Francisco at the convention last summer.

I developed very strong relationships with my leaders. They always have my home phone number, they have my cell number, they can call me any time. I talk to them, if not daily, several times a week. We have our committee meetings. At that time, we were having committee meetings like every week, we would meet. These were women who had no power. No power, and no sense that they could *have* power. No sense of how to come together and get power. And so I had to do a *lot* of work with them. And the most rewarding part of this work for me is moving people from the position of feeling totally powerless to a position of power. Empowering them. That's the part that does it for me in all of this. [laughs]

It's obviously a calling, not just a job, for you.

And to see these women come together, and get their stuff together and stand up for themselves. They would have captive audience meetings. I remember my very first group, we had a captive audience meeting, and Debbie said, "OK, you get them ready,

and you tell them what to say, and you tell them, 'Don't just sit there and listen'"—that they had to stand up and talk. So we practiced. I primed them and they did what I said, and it just turned the meeting around.

When we did one Head Start, then we had learned a few tricks. [chuckles] And so there was this guy in the regional office, the Head Start regional office, a bigwig, and there was some little thing in the Head Start rules that say Head Starts are supposed to remain neutral in union organizing, and they're not supposed to do anything to encourage it or deter it. And so this guy sent out this letter, and he was gonna have a captive audience meeting. And so I went right all over his head to the regional office, and sent this meeting notice, and I told him, "Look. He's planning this captive audience meeting, he's gonna browbeat these people against the union," and blah-blah-blah-blah. And then I sent him this copy of the letter that I had sent the guy, and then on the back of it, I put the Head Start regulations out of the handbook and stuff--he called the meeting off.

Uh huh. [chuckles]

You know, so you learn little tricks [chuckles] going on, with Head Starts. And by the time I did, like, the fourth one, I felt like I really knew a lot. But working with the Head Start women, because they were—I mean, they didn't have health insurance, their wages were bad, the boards of these places were messed up. They were just not running well. Money was being not handled properly. And so in the course of them unionizing, when Julie came in there to bargain those contracts, and she had to work with those boards, she ended up really helping to rebuild those organizations. On some of them, like the first one, they got rid of the president. So then they had to rebuild that board. And then the people who came on, they were really working hand-in-hand with the union. They did that contract—they completely rebuilt that place. It runs *much* better now that they have that union contract. And it was because of...because if they hadn't sat down to negotiate that contract, it would've kept running the way it was running, and it was a mess! And the people got health insurance. They got some stuff that they never had before, and their wages came up. A lot of these women qualified for Head Start.

I'm sure.

A lot of them were on public assistance, and they working, you know, 40 hours a week—it was crazy!

Describe the kinds of training you received as an organizer. 925 was kind of famous, wasn't it, for doing regular trainings, having summer schools—things like that?

I guess they were.

Or was it mostly on the job for you?

I guess they were, but for me...I came in, I guess, at the end of 925, so I didn't have...

Didn't have that--?

That was not my experience. Most of my stuff was on the job. I went to the O.I. for a weekend.

What's the O.I.?

The Organizing Institute. And so that was kind of my— I mean, Kim flew down to the O.I. that weekend that I was there, and she interviewed me. She was really clear that it depended on what the outcome of the O.I. was, if they thought I could be an organizer or not. And if I passed there, then they would hire me. So that's what happened.

Oh, that's the stage that brought you here.

Uh huh.

And how many years now have you been—

Well, no. At that time, Kim was the--

Oh, Kim was something else.

She was the organizing director—

I see.

—in *District* 925, so she did all the hiring of organizers, no matter *what* office they worked in.

I see. When you came out to Seattle, was it hard to sort of start again in a brand-new city that you'd never lived in?

No. Not really. By the time I moved here, it was five years later than starting. I worked five years stationed out of the Cincinnati office, but I actually worked in all the other offices, except I had never worked in the Seattle office until, when I came out for those three months. And then there was an opening here, and Kim offered it to me.

I thought that I wanted to move. In fact, I didn't think I wanted to work for the SEIU union in Ohio. And so I actually interviewed for a job in California, so I was kind of deciding between California and Seattle. I kind of wanted the California job, in a way, but it wasn't with SEIU. And so this way I can keep my retirement. But I knew when my partner came to Seattle, she was not going to want— I knew she didn't want to go to L.A., in the first place. And I knew when she came to Seattle and saw these trees, and the mountains and the water, you know, this is what she would choose. So it ended up being a mutual decision.

And you came how many years ago to Seattle?

It's been four years...I think. [laughs] I think it's been four years. Yeah.

What did you observe or experience in 925 about the roles of men? Since it's been kind of a woman-dominated...

Well, you know, there wasn't any roles of men in the old one. It was all women. And we liked it that way.

You know, they're definitely in the minority when they appear.

We had just hired a man in our office, right before the merger.

After these years of organizing, is there anything you can say about the values of 925's organizing, the strategy and tactics? What values do they represent when they're doing organizing?

I think in all of the organizing campaigns, our main purpose, of course, was to get a union and a union contract for these workers and better their working conditions. But I do think that empowering the workers is what I saw. It's kind of what Debbie put out there, is what was really important. And Kim too. And Anne--all of them. That, you know, it was really about the workers.

Getting them involved and—

Well, getting them involved, and just getting them...educating them to understand that they did have—there was *power* in numbers; there was *power* in their organizing. That if they all stuck together and formed a union and bargained their contracts, they could make changes in their workplace. They didn't have to be working someplace where somebody was... whatever, yelling and screaming at them, and targeting people, and where you had no health insurance, and you're working for a stupid wage, and that kind of stuff.

I worked in a lot of organizing campaigns in Cleveland, too. Because we were so close, I would go back and forth. I worked on Head Starts in Cleveland. We did a community college, Cleveland State University. That was a *big* organizing campaign there. And it was with the professionals.

Oh, professional staff?

Yeah. And it was great.

Do you remember any stories from that campaign?

One big story. The president of the university decided, the weekend before the election day, at that weekend, everybody got a video at their house. And it was a video of him,

making a speech to them about why they didn't need a union, and why everything was so great for them, and why he was so great, and, you know, all this. We were going into this election kind of...we *thought* we had enough people to win, but we weren't sure. There were some people who were—which is always the case. They were doing the anti-union stuff; we were losing support. He sent that video out. It pissed people off so much, because you think...there were 370-something people in that bargaining unit. For him to do a video...First of all, to do it—make 370-something copies and them mail them out—so how much money was that. And people were so pissed off—

It really backfired.

Yes! They were just coming to the polls in droves, voting for the union. It was so funny! It totally backfired.

That's really a funny story.

It was a funny story. Because you know how professionals can be, anyway. They can be, like, really apathetic, and...we encountered this at the University of Washington.

They don't think they should...unions aren't for professionals.

Well, yeah, but, well, they were being so mistreated there, though. And they were making a *big*—These were the non-tenured people, but they were teaching right alongside the tenured people. And so the tenured faculty, you know, they were getting all these things. But these people, they were treating them like dirt, you know. A lot of them had worked there for like 20 years! I mean, they'd worked there a really long time, and had a lot of longevity in, and so they were pretty pissed off. But then, you know, things just happen at the end of a campaign sometimes. Management starts promising and telling you why you don't need a union, and doing all these little things. They start the little anti-committee. And sometimes it can be effective. And so there were a lot of fence-sitters, kind of; we didn't know which way they were gonna go. Until that video came out. And that did it.

END of SIDE B of TAPE 1
START OF SIDE A of TAPE 2

Do you consider—well I guess your kids were grown up. But do you consider 925 a family-friendly organization? Do you know about other activists' experiences, combining parenting with organizing?

I would say....I'd have to honestly say, I don't know how anybody can do union work and raise children. I look at people here. If you're a rep, you can control your work a little bit more. Certainly, working for this local, it's much more family friendly than the International, because they're just...I don't know how people work for them.

And this would be in Washington, you mean?

Yes. Yeah, the International organizers, I just...I don't see how work for them. And some of the other locals. Even some of the locals here, the way they work their organizing staff is just appalling to me. I don't know how they do it.

Do you think that means that maybe women don't stay in it once they have young kids?

Yeah. That's what I think.

They have to choose, probably.

Yeah. I don't see how anybody can do this job with young kids. You have to go away a lot, you're expected to work long hours. I don't see how you do it. Like I said, if you're a rep, you can organize your work a little more and a little better, for family time. But if you're working full time as an organizer, when you doing campaigns where you have to blitz a lot, and you're out of town a lot...Like, you know, we're doing a statewide campaign here, so we've got to go all over the state. I don't see how you could have kids and do this, and do soccer practice and Girl Scouts and swimming lessons and check homework. I'm never home at 5:00 or 6:00. Sometimes I am. But at least three or four nights a week, I'm not. I guess if you have a good spouse. I decided it's not--to me, this is not a job that you should have and have young children. I just thought it was a little bit...Or teenagers!

Is your partner pretty supportive of you doing this kind of work?

Or teenagers! Because you have to watch teenagers closer than you do young children! Whew, Lord! My partner's very supportive. Uh huh. She is.

So if you don't show up for dinner five nights a week, she can handle that? Tell me what your day is like when you're doing one of these blitzes.

Basically you get up at 6 o'clock, 7 o'clock. You usually have to be at work by about 8 o'clock. You debrief. You try to hit your doors at 9:00.

As a lead organizer, you're out there, going door to door like everybody else?

Um-hm. And you do it until usually 7 or 8 o'clock at night. Then you come in and you debrief. And then you start all over again the next day. And that's what it is.

When we're working out of the office...I'll give you an example of this week. Monday is always our team meeting. We meet by conference call because we're all over Washington. And then I have three mailings that I needed to do for three separate meetings, and so that's what I've done Monday and Tuesday, and making phone calls, prepping for a meeting that I have tomorrow night, where we are having a meeting with a guy who's over licensing, for child care providers? They're having a problem with their

licensers, they're just...

Are they state employees, these people?

No, they're independent business people, but they are licensed by the state.

Oh, that's what I meant. The licenser.

Yeah, the licensers are state employees, yeah. But they're arbitrary, you know. They're contrary. You know, there are state laws—the [WACS]--that they're supposed to go by, but they don't; they interpret them any way they want. There's no consistency to the way these rules are followed. One licenser can tell one provider that they have to do something one way, and tell another licenser—and the WAC could say something altogether different. But these women are afraid to stand up because they'll tell them, "Well, if you don't do it, I'm not going to give you your license." And then what? They're out of business. So that's a big issue. So we're having a meeting with this guy to talk about some of these licensing problems and inconsistencies. And so we're prepping for the meeting. The problem with child care providers is they like to talk. Because they're so isolated all day, just with themselves and those children, when they get together, boy, they're just [makes sounds of constant talking]. "That happened to me!" and, "That happened to me too!"

All the anecdotes.

Oh, my God! So it's just hard keeping them in *control.* [chuckles]

To get through the agenda, you mean.

To get through the agenda. But I'm trying to prep them for this meeting, so that everybody is on one page, people are not *jumping* in, we're staying on target. Because when you bring these people in, you've got a succinct amount of time to talk to them about what you want to talk to them about. And to keep people in control, and don't have them like...going berserk on the man and yelling and screaming and stuff, because then you'll never have another dialogue with them because they won't come back. You know what I'm saying.

It's real organizing.

Real organizing is what I'm doing, yeah.

Looking back, as you understand them, do you think the aims of 925 were realized?

I think so. Like I said, I didn't come in in the beginning of it, but from what I understand of it, it was to help empower office workers and raise their pay and their working conditions. And yes, I think those goals *were* realized.

And do you think 925 had some impact on SEIU, as a whole?

I think they did. I think 925 has its own little niche in history. I was telling one of my providers about this when we were house-visiting. And he was saying, "Do they have a book about it?" I said, "Well," I said, "I know they're doing archives, I don't know if they're gonna prepare anything printed." But I think it would be good if something printed were prepared. Because there needs to be something that people can read. Because it was a unique time in history, and it was a unique way of organizing. And I think we did--they did make a difference. So I think it ought to be available for people to read about it.

Well, it seems like a lot of leaders, women leaders, came out of 925.

A lot. More than I realized. I didn't realize, really, how many, until we did that thing last year.

Can you think of anything else you'd want to say about the legacy of 925?

No, I just hated to see it, I just hated...I really hated...I understand, you know, for the greater good, the New Strength in Unity thing. And this local has certainly grown and done a lot better by its members because of it. And I'm sure the members in Ohio have gained from being a part of a larger organization, I guess. Although I'm sure it's different, because they came from this women-centered organization, and now they're a part of one that's run by a man and I'm sure it's different. I'm sure it feels different for the members. But...

What does being an organizer with 925 mean in your life?

I think I have a better quality of life, as an organizer, than I would if I were organizing for a different local or for the International.

When you think about the meaning of your life in general as an organizer?

The meaning of my life in general.

I mean, that's kind of a big—

That's a deep question. [chuckles]

Yeah. How you see yourself and your moving through the world. In the middle part of your life, you became this union organizer, you know?

Almost at the end of my work life, really. Because this will be, like, the end of it. Because I'll be 59 in August. So I'm not gonna be doing this too much longer. [laughs] So it's really like the end.

You know, it's been empowering for me. I've learned a lot of things. I've done a lot of things that I wouldn't have done. I've helped a lot of people that I wouldn't have been able to help, sitting in an office, doing schedules. That was, I thought, certainly a safe job, and a safe way to get a halfway decent retirement. It didn't turn out that way. But, no, this has been a good thing. It's been a good thing. Like I said, I'm 59, so I don't want to do it too much longer. Just because it's tiring, you know, at my age, to work 12- or 14-hour days, 7 days in a row. So, no, I don't want to do it too much longer. But I'm hangin' in all right. And I think it's a great job to have the end of my career with. You know, on a lot of levels.

It seems like someone like Kim—you've known her for awhile. You're kind of part of a big family almost, aren't you.

Uh huh.

In 925. What do your kids think about you as a union organizer? Do they ever give you any feedback on that?

Well, you know, my kids...It's funny.

My daughter isn't much of an organizer herself, but—

No, my kids are not really activist kind of people. They really are not. You know, they call me and say, "Where are you this week, Mom? Are you in Seattle?" You know. If I call and say, "Oh, I'm in wherever," they just say, "Oh, OK." You know, it doesn't surprise them anymore. They know...but I've always been a joiner, I've always been active. I always encouraged them to be active, and join activities when they were younger kids. They just consider it, it's their mom. They really didn't like me moving to Seattle, but I really think it was good for them that I moved to Seattle. [chuckling] Because it kind of forced them to get some independence that they needed to have. I wonder what my mother thinks, though. My brother and I talk about this. Because I live in Seattle, he lives in the Virgin Islands. "So what do you think Momma and Daddy are thinking now?"

And they're still going and—?

Oh, no, my parents are dead. We would *never,* neither one of us. I would still be living in Ohio, my brother would still be in Ohio if my parents were alive, either one of them.

So you're a real close family?

Well, we were a close family, but we were *raised* that we had to take care of our parents until they died, and nobody was going to a nursing home. So that's the culture in my family, and so that's what we did. Everybody stayed home, and we took care of them until they died. That was just how it was. So we would still be in Ohio if either of our parents were alive.

Final question: Do you feel optimistic about this organizing campaign you're doing now?

Oh, yeah, we're gonna win. We're gonna win. The only thing that will make it hard for us is if the governor gets kicked out, [chuckles] and we get Rossi. And I still think we'll win. We just have to take...you know, we'll have to go to Plan B. So it might take a little longer. But, yeah. These people want a union. And we haven't even...I mean, we've only signed up, like, 10% of them. But if this 10% is any indication of the other 90%, I don't —

They're firm and strong about it.

Yeah. I mean they have issues. And that's the easiest place to organize, is when people have issues, and you...and just the thought of them being able to get health insurance. Because people are paying anywhere from $300 to $900 for health insurance a month. You know. So.

And they don't make that much money in childcare that they could afford that.

Well, some of them do.

Oh, some of them?

Some of them do. Some of them make over $100,000. But that's their gross, not their adjusted gross, because they have a lot of write-offs—food, toys, and...you should see some of these homes. These people have invested *money* into their childcares in their homes. A lot of them have this rainbow play equipment. Those things cost 5 and $6,000, you know, for swings! [laughs] Yeah, they have put in huge investments.

So it's a whole range—the licensed providers, some of which are kind of high-end, and then the family daycare. I was told there are license-exempt groups..

There are license and license-exempt. Now, the license-exempt is like Grandma. And most of them don't have...you know, it's Grandma, they're taking care of their grandkids. They take care of them in the living room. They don't have like...daycares. The licensed providers, most of them have a set dedicated place, either their family rooms or they've built on rooms, or they've taken the whole downstairs of their house, or whatever. And they've turned it into what looks like a pre-school. And they've got all kinds of equipment and toys and—

What's the average number of kids they have?

They can only have 12 if they have a big space. And if you have a smaller space, they'll license you for 6, 8 or 12, is, you know, how they do it.

And can one person take care of 12?

One person can only take care of 8 children—that's the most. And none of them can be under 2. If you have so many under 2, then you have to have another person. If you have over 8, you have to have another person.

So even though there's this wide disparity, kind of, in the type of daycare, they all see the need for the insurance, and the better state regs, and things like that.

Um huh. Some control over these licensers [ ]

What keeps you going as an organizer, at this point? [chuckles]

I don't know!

We probably talked about it earlier, talking about...seeing these women change.

I call myself a short-timer now. I want to see this to the end. And probably...this will be my last big campaign, depending on how long it takes us to do this. If we really have an election in September, I'll be working for a little while longer. But I don't intend to work too much past 60, doing this.

Do they have work you can do, like, halftime or sometime?

It's kind of *hard* being a organizer half-time.

Yeah, it just keeps growing to fill like a full-time job.

Yeah. We tried to hire people part-time for organizing. It's hard to do, just because it's consuming. It's all-consuming. I certainly work more than 40 hours. People call me anytime. They call me Saturday, Sunday, whatever. Unless I just turn my phone off. But that's my thing—I'm pretty much accessible to my people. They get a idea or a thought, or they get afraid about something or whatever, I'd rather deal with it *then*, and talk about it. I think people are willing to step out--you talked about the women who thought they might lose their jobs—people are willing to take a chance and step out and believe in you, if...I guess, if they believe in you. If you've developed the kind of relationship with them that lets them know *I'm there for you, all the way, all the time. If they* do *fire you, it's illegal, it's against the law, and we're gonna step in with all the power that we have and fight it...*

You have to build that trust.

You have to build that trust, yeah.

So after you retire, do you think you'll do some kind of other organizing, maybe?

No. I'm gonna sell real estate.

Oh!

I'm gonna sell real estate, make jewelry and ... I don't know—I've toyed with opening a retail outlet. I have a friend who has a really successful dress shop in Ohio. She's been talking to me about if I want to open one out here, and so I'm toying with that idea.

Gilda, I just remembered something. I read the back of your t-shirt. Do you want to tell me anything about the lavender caucus of SEIU, how it functions and what it provides its members?

I don't know that it really provides anything. When they have those meetings every four years, all the gay and lesbian people get together and they meet. Basically, I don't really see a whole lot that they do. I thought it was great that SEIU recognizes them. They also had a AfrAm conference of African-American people. They have some other caucuses. And I just think it's great that they recognize that diversity in the union.

That's kind of it's main purpose, isn't that, to recognize and acknowledge and value diversity?

Yeah.

I don't think too many unions have that, do they?

I don't think so.

At least, not a lavender caucus. Whether they have African-American...

I don't think so, yeah. I don't think so.

So there are some unique things about SEIU.

Yeah. Here, at 925, always at 925 since I joined, we've had domestic partner benefits before it was popular, especially in Ohio. [laughs] They've always treated my partner like anybody else's spouse; there's never been any...And so it's been great to work in a place that's affirming that way.

Yeah.

Anything else you'd like to add?

No, that's it.

I've really prevented you from eating your lunch, one more time.

That's all right.

INTERVIEW ENDS