Debra Young
Interviewed by Ann Froines
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Seattle

I'm interviewing Debra Young, who is a managed care program coordinator at the University of Washington in Seattle, on May 12, 2005. Debra, tell me the story about how you first entered 925. What was your first contact with the organization?

My first contact—I was a unit clerk on 5 East. Me and Marlene [_____name?] —she was a float unit clerk. At that time they wanted to change our job titles, and give us more work to do. I had already been working I think about 5 years at the time, with the U., and I didn't want to do anything more, I didn't sign up to do anything more. Basically they wanted us to be like [hospital] assistance where you would lift patients and transport patients, outside of doing the paperwork and stuff like that on the unit. 5 East is an intensive care unit for kidney transplants and stuff like that, and for patients that come down from the emergency room that need to have ICU care. So me and her had been talking, because she floats to my unit all the time. I said, "There's something we should do," I said, "Maybe we should get in talks with the union." So [Jay/Jake] and at this time —Jake has to forgive me, I can't remember his last name—he was the organizing rep for SEIU—I mean District 925 at the time. I think Marlena had actually contacted him and he had a meeting with us during our lunch time. So he had talked to us. He said, "What do you think about getting some unit clerks together to see if they want to organize to get into the union?" Because at the time he didn't know if we were connected with District 925 or not, and really didn't know, because we had never gotten anything from any other union, and we weren't paying any dues, so we felt we weren't in a union.

So we did get a meeting together—we got a pretty good—I think there was about 10 or 15 people, if I remember right. It was in the evening, it was a evening meeting, and we got someone to come during their lunch breaks, so we tried to do around lunch break. And we actually got a lot of people to sign signature things, and then we come to find out at the end when we get enough people to sign signature things, we find out that we <u>are</u> connected with a union, but it was a union that no one had ever told us about. Even when we first started at the U. So what we wanted to do, basically, was try to get out of that union—and they were going to let us do it—sign it—but it would take a year, or something like that. It kind of petered out our flow of excitement, and being able to get into District 925. So we felt a little defeated because actually the University is the one that actually told us that we were in another union, so that we couldn't get in with District 925. So that's how it started.

What happened with them trying to make you do this work—did you end up having to do it?

We had meetings with the other supervisors and the people that were over the unit at the time. People were opposed to it. So there was enough opposition. I think what had happened was that they showed that we were going to organize... So they decided that

they weren't going to do anything—put that into our job descriptions. And if you wanted to do it you could. But not very many people—especially the people that had been doing this for a long time. So that's how—

That's how you started. Now after that year passed, and you were then in 925, how did your own involvement start with the organization?

Really how I got into 925 is I had to change my job description, and I wanted to get into 925 badly enough that I was seeking out a different position—it's called a patient service rep. They were in 925. They worked in the clinics. I was more on the floors in the hospital. So they worked in the clinic. I kept applying for different positions, or looking at different positions, and I applied to this one position at the women's clinic. They were moving to a new building, where we're at right now, so they were looking for new people. So I applied, got the job, and so I was in, finally. And that was the best thing that ever happened to me, is getting into 925. Because at that point, since I got into the unit, I became more active at that time...

Did you become the steward in an area, or what?

I became active in the point that we were still trying to get unit clerks into 925, and I was going to meetings, and seeing how things worked. Actually Kim Cook got me more involved—and Jay—got me more involved in doing different other campaigns that were going on with the contract at the time. And I took an organizing class—it was downtown in Seattle. They sent me to some trainings, different trainings, one was at—

Locally in the region?

Yes, in the region. One was at Evergreen College, over by Olympia. I went there and did some training. Basically they had me do some training, then I ran for trustee.

Tell me what a trustee is.

A trustee is, basically, you're guarding the financial part of the organization. You're kind of looking out, make sure everything goes right for the members. And I took that job very seriously, because I had never been—I actually looked up what a trustee was, to try to find it, because I'd never been a trustee. You always see trustees in these organizations but you never know what they do. So when I looked at, it's basically you're guarding the dues of the members. And making sure that they're spent correctly and that the monies are going where they should go. Basically at the end of the year, you're the one that goes to the financial meetings to make sure everything is going correctly and that everything is in order. So I really took that very seriously at the time.

In the beginning years, I was very idealistic about union activity and my role and how I felt I could affect their establishment. As I've gotten older, I know that it's not just one person saying one thing or...fifty people. It has to be at least 100 people... So my ideal (laughs)

Or maybe a thousand.

Or a thousand. You have to have some backup behind you. But in the beginning, I was very, very, very idealistic about any position I took. I've been a trustee, I've been a vice-president twice, I've been president once—acting president and then president. Because I took over for someone that left at the middle of her term; because I was vice-president I took over. And then I became president one time. And I've been on the executive board several times.

It sounds like you've done just about everything you could do.

Yeah, everything I could do as a member. As a member and an employee.

We should get this all down in a minute. Any other experiences as an activist or an organizer prior to your involvement with the union?

When I was younger, like in high school, I've always been very—I never called myself an activist at the time, but I (was) just very involved. I was in the Black Panthers when I was in high school.

That was in Seattle?

No, it was in Tacoma. I'm from Tacoma, actually. I was born there. And I worked with the breakfast program. And that was very important to me—the kids, and making sure they food, and breakfast was always the important—at least my mother always told me it was the important thing of the day, and so I worked with that part. We were just one chapter in Tacoma.

I was in the Black Student Union at my high school. And I've always been very active about people of color, especially African Americans, our rights and stuff, when I was younger. Then I also got involved with the Student Union. I first started college at the University. Got married, transferred to Pacific Lutheran University and went to the Black Student—me and my husband were president and vice-president of the Black Student Union at PLU which was predominantly a white school and had never had African American or any person of color at that school. It was a positive experience. We did a lot of things. One of my things is--I was a social welfare major—was how blacks adjust to a predominantly white school and vice versa, and so we had little meetings around campus, which was a very small campus, Pacific Lutheran is. I started out that way. I've always been kind of active in that manner. Not as a whole as a group of people, but issues around African American issues.

What were some of your experiences maybe as an office worker, although maybe you worked always in the medical field—I don't know. Did you experience a lack of respect toward workers in settings that you worked in?

Most of my jobs—when I got out of college, my first job was, I was trying to get a job as a social worker and found that if I wasn't white or male—because I wanted to work in the detention-type centers—and I hadn't a military record, I wasn't going to get in. A guy actually told me that in the interview.

Unless you had a military record?

A military record or [I was] connected, or if I was white and I was male. That I wasn't going to get in. It was very disheartening, and I remember that so well. But then I went from that, I went and worked as a office clerk in an insurance company, front desk—and here I have a college degree. So I worked as this clerk, but I was trying to be a property adjuster. I noticed the difference, from you're out front and the people are in the back. And you're just the lowly secretary, and you're supposed to do everything and don't ask any question. I could see the difference. Especially when I actually applied for one of the—because they kept telling me I could apply for one of the positions once it opened. Well, I did apply, and there was no other qualified person but me, because I had a degree. But then they didn't want to send me back East for schooling, they wanted to do all my schooling in this one little room in—

Was that the insurance company?

Uh huh.

So you decided you didn't have a future in insurance.

Well, not insurance. I worked there for a couple of years. I was married at the time, and I really didn't have to work because my husband was making enough money, but I worked because I like my own money. And it was a eye opener, that job, I tell you. It was something to see how different you—not just being a worker but being a African American woman worker. Because there were other workers that were white that were secretaries that didn't get treated like I was. But still they were treated differently than the people that were the adjusters or the main people in the back. So there was that difference there. It's just a different difference. I guess it's a little more, because when you're African American and you're a office worker, and you're a woman, you have almost 3 strikes against you, almost, in the workplace. That's how I see it. I think a lot of Af—

It's probably especially in Seattle, right?

Oh yeah, very much so.

Maybe it's different than Cleveland where—

Oh, yes.

--50% of the workforce there in the offices might be African American.

That's correct. I'm here.

You were a literal numerical minority in that case. Did you have any awareness about the women's movement in the '70's and '80's and issues about women?

Yes, I did. I felt that that was part—I think one of the things that I felt that if the women's movement went ahead, then that would help me, in some way. Maybe minute, but I could ride on that wave. As far as an African American woman. Outside of the race card thing. But that part—if women, and at the time it was mostly white women, I felt that we could as African Americans, could kind of ride on that wave, because if women can—women regardless of who you were, were low on the totem pole as far as men were concerned, and in the workforce. But if you're black, you're even lower. So I felt that that was a positive thing that was going on.

I did try to promote, when I was at UW, because there was a lot of things that were going at UW at the time—I joined into some rallies and stuff like that. But as joining in, not as —

You mean women's rights rallies?

Yeah, women's rights rallies. I would go to be part of it, but...

Growing up did you have any knowledge or experience of labor struggles?

Yes. My uncle was a longshoreman. First black longshoreman. There was actually a article written up on him. He just died last year. In Tacoma. He and I used to go there. I was really close with him because he was close with my grandmother and I was close with my grandmother, because she would either be over there or he would come over to her house. When I used to go over to his home and spend the weekends, they used to always have union meetings at the house, and talking and fighting and arguing. I guess I never really kind of knew how bad it was for him. I knew it was a struggle for him.

Do you mean as one of the few—

As few there. Yeah. He was one of the first blacks, African Americans.

Were these meetings integrated racially?

Yes, some of them were. There was a few—I guess like head union people would be at the meetings to try to help promote him and other African American people trying to get up in the ladder. Some of it had to do with just the labor union itself, meeting. This wasn't the labor union. It was like talking about the labor hall and how they treated African Americans, and who would jobs and who wouldn't get called, and that kind of thing. So those were discussions that he would have. I remember hearing, upstairs I had

a little room up there—kind of like a attic area—and I could hear them arguing and talking about it all the time.

So you had quite a political consciousness by the time you were in high school.

Oh yeah. Very much so.

Were you or your parents involved in civil rights activities here?

No, I think my father was. My father was in the air force when I was born, but from what I understand, they're from the South. My mother is from the Midwest, and she—when we came up here, the discrimination or the quiet or unsubtle discrimination was kind of strange for her. It was very hard for her. Because mostly where she lived was black townships, you know, all black, they owned their own businesses and stuff like that. My grandmother, she lived—she's from Louisiana area. They owned their own businesses and own homes and stuff like that. But when she came up—my Mom came here, she was just amazed of...I was always hearing the argument, "Well, they can't treat us like that! They can't do that!" What do you mean, you know. And it was hard for her. So I remember hearing that all the time, and talking about race, and talking about civil rights and stuff like that, and justice, what's right and what's wrong, how people should be treated.

Did your mother work too?

Yeah, my Mom—she initially started—I'm the oldest of 10: 7 girls and 3 boys. When she did start working (laughs)—she went back to school. She became a LPN—licensed practical nurse. Worked out at Matigan. Worked there for a few years. Hurt her back, picking up a soldier from bed. Didn't work for a while, then went back to work as a janitor at public schools. Then she became the first woman boilermaker, and African American woman, in Tacoma [in the schools].

Interesting. You should have a oral history film made about your family. The first this, the first that...

It's kind of funny. They did do something on my uncle in the paper—this Evergreen—the guy over there—he did a thing on him. My family—when I talk about it, it's really funny because I don't think about it. I don't think it as the first, I just think it's something we had to do because it was there. Or we did it because it was something that we wanted to do and we felt we should be able to do it. Just like my Mom, you know, when she went to class for these boiler classes, I didn't know she was the first until after she retired. I didn't know that. I just knew that it was unusual because a woman never does this type of stuff. But in our whole family, we've always done untraditional work. I think I'm about the only traditional person, actually. (laughs) I'm the oldest.

You must have had to do a fair amount of child-raising.

Oh, yeah, I did that. (laughs) Yeah, I did a lot of that.

Can you describe in some detail one of the campaigns you were involved in with 925? Maybe when you were an officer particularly? What were the big issues for you?

There were so many campaigns. I think one of the ones is when we—and I can't—it was for numerous things. When I was president when we all walked out the one day that we had—we were like—I can't tell you exactly what it was for—it was about a contract thing.

The one-day strike?

The one-day strike—that was about the most beautiful thing I've ever seen in my life. And we're all standing up there. And I mean, I got people from out of my job who—and I worked in a women's clinic. And it's mostly women, and some—these are mostly people that—they don't mind if I go out, and they'll let me do anything I need—"Well, Debra, we'll give you time," or whatever, donate time or whatever, "for you to do whatever you need to do for the union." And they would sign anything I'd tell them to sign, that is good for them. I'd say, "Well, this is a good thing, you need to sign, and say that this is what you want." But this time I didn't know if I could get 'em to go out. Because most of the time they would always say "no" to me about coming to a union meeting, or—"I don't have time," or—most of them didn't even live in the city, so—like I don't live in the city—so it's hard to stay and then have to try to get back out. So they all came out. They did hours—everybody took shifts. They covered for each other.

Because you still had patient care responsibilities.

That's correct. We all covered. And we had a guilt feeling about it. Because you know you want to make sure you take care of these people that are coming in, because most of them are sick or whatever. And most of them are women. They gotta work too. So we worked it out where we would cover for each other. And that means, these are the people that were even off, or took the day off, or whatever, would come in and cover for each other. So we did work it out. And all our people came out. And so I was really—

And that gave you a good feeling.

Oh, it made me feel like—I was so proud of them. I couldn't even tell them how proud I was. I kept saying it over and over and over—they kept saying, "Ok, Debra." (laughs) I just couldn't—I think it was just the biggest deal. And it actually did something. It made a movement. And that made me feel really good. It made me feel empowered. I think that's what it was. I felt empowered in that we are doing something here. And we can make a difference.

How did you feel when you first ran for office in 925. Was that a big step?

That was a big step. I had a lot of mentoring. I had a lot of people pushing. Dorney McKinsey who's now one of the organizers here—she was the president at the time. And she was the one that kind of quit in between her term. And I told her, I says, "You can't quit, because I can't do this. I am not going to be able to do it. That means I gotta talk in front of people." I said, "You mean I have to give a speech, and I have to do—" She said, "You can do this. You can do it." She kept telling me I could do it; Kim Cook told me I could do it. And they would give me tools to work. Kim Cook, Dorney, and Debbie Schneider were my mentors, I think, the people that kind of pushed me to be more of a leader and told me I could when I didn't think I could. And gave me the confidence, I think it was, basically. They pushed me to be—and run again for vice-president or president or trustee. Even when I tried for trustee, Kim and Jay kept telling me I could do it. "You can do this. It's not that big of a deal, it's a small step." And I said, "Ok, ok, ok."

Do you remember some of the details of the trainings? Because you started to say, "and they gave me the tools to do it."

Most of the tools that they gave me were like—we had little in-services about what is organizing. And they were always talking about how to organize, how do you approach someone—I used to go door to doors. And to me, that's training, because I could never —

On the job training.

On the job training.

Did you go door to door in your office?

In the offices and out during the campaign door-to-door for like members that are out in their homes. I never had done anything like that, going door to door. And just talking to people one on one. It's not that I have a problem talking to people one on one, but when you get in the workplace, people are afraid to talk. And you have to break that ice somehow. Make them comfortable enough to talk about what their feelings are, and what the problems that they're having. And some of my social work stuff came into play, but I just was nervous about it. And then having to speak at rallies. They'd help me prepare my speeches and basically I'd just—they'd write it out and I'd put in stuff that I wanted to say, and then I'd say something totally different. (laughs)_ But it was—

And after you gained your confidence, you realized—

"Oh, I can do this. I can speak at—" Well, I always have a problem, though. I still have the stomach queasy things, but I just go up there and do it, because that's what they just —they just kept telling me, "You can do this." And that's what I say to myself. "You can do this. You can do this. No problem." And I felt like if they think I can do it, I can do this, I can do it. And they really pushed me a lot to be more involved in the union, and do more things.

What do you think was different about 925's approach to union organizing?

What they bring to it than other unions, I think is, and what historically has been known for union organizing, is basically—you have the reps, you go to the rep, rep does everything. In 925 organizing, you empower your members to do for themselves, basically. That's how I see it. What they do is empower that member to take on their union. Own it. Make it yours. And if you own it and you make it yours, then you want to protect it, you want to keep it going, so that means you'll organize more people to get involved, you'll want more people to understand what you're all about, so, to me, 925 made members feel empowered that they could do anything; that they could talk to anybody about what they need or what their needs are—any boss or any other organization.

When you were working to try to get women in the union, did they feel their jobs would be at risk?

Oh, yeah, I used to always feel this, "Well, you're not supposed to talk to me during work time." I says, "Well, I can talk to you on your break if you want to, or I'll come back at your lunchtime, we can make an appointment," I said, "But you know, you can talk about this. Just like they can talk about what they did Saturday night, and they talk about politics at work, you can talk to me. You will not lose your job."

So they had a lot of misconceptions.

A lot of misconceptions, and some of it was fostered by the employer—you know, they didn't dispel those misconceptions. And African American people, I noticed, was a little different, because they would either not talk to me at all, because they were always afraid anyway, that it would be just one more thing—they don't want you there anyway, so then here you are talking about unions, that's another strike. And they've actually told me that. And I said, "Well, you know, you don't have to worry about that. Actually some of your protection is the union—extra protection." But you would have to make it a different setting. I'd have to take them out of the office setting some time. Some people didn't care, (laughs) so I would talk to them. But most people were afraid. They were very afraid.

You said a little bit about the kinds of training you received as an organizer. How did you feel about the leadership of 925? You talked with me already about your own self as a leader, that you didn't think of yourself as a leader. But the whole idea of women's leadership is really the theme we're exploring.

In the beginning, I really didn't know anything. I was very naïve about how it works. There was mostly women at the time. Neal…I've forgotten

Culver.

Culver was the president at the time, when I first joined. I was sitting in this room, we were over by the waterfront. I said, "Well, here is all these women and there's a guy standing up there. Now that's something." I didn't know Neal at the time. Neal really should have been a woman. I'm not saying anything about his manhood but (laughs).

I interviewed Neal yesterday.

Neal is a great guy.

He had some doubts about being president, believe me.

Oh, I'm sure he did. Because you know, I looked at him, I says, "Well, why is that guy standing up there and all these women are in this room. aHe was really a great teacher...

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START of SIDE B of TAPE 1

He knew about women in unions and the history of 925. Because he was there in the beginning. I had not been there in the beginning. I was there in the later quarters of 925. After it broke up and everything. Not broke up. We actually expanded. That was something. I think it was great to see women—Kim was the district manager at the time, and the head person was Debbie Schneider, and all--in Cleveland, and all the other places there was just women basically, there were a few men scattered here and there. But all those men were men that had some halo around them or something because they seemed to understand that this was about women a lot, but it was just about workers really in general. And they respect the women that were in leadership. And I did too, because it made me feel good, to see women in leadership and really taking on the role of what men normally did in unions. And so, it gave me some possibilities.

What can you say about your own development as a leader?

As a leader, I think that I've grown—God—tremendously as a person. I've had to deal with so many different political—you know, you have the political situation just within the union; you have to deal with the political stuff outside in your everyday life. But I've known that in any union there's political stuff. Wherever you go you have to deal with people. What I've learned about myself is that—and what they've taught me basically—Kim, Dorney, Debbie—they have always pump--made me feel that I could do anything I want. And I feel I can. Right now, I feel that I could do anything I want. If I didn't have some of my medical limited abilities right now, I could do any. And I could voice my opinion and I won't be afraid to do that. That if I might even lose my job if I voice my opinion. But at this point in my life or in before, I feel like I it would be ok. Because I will have voiced my opinion. And I will have empowered myself to do—I know what my rights are, as far as a union member; I know what the employers can and cannot do, so I feel empowered. That's what I think I've learned a lot about it, as a leader, to empower. I've been empowered, so I want to empower somebody else, and carry that on, and carry that on.

What are some of the issues that you are involved in? I believe from something Kim told me that you may have been president at the time of the mergers.

That was major. That was a major—

Nobody's described that to me yet.

We had—what was it, four different [areas], four different districts, four different—and we all had to come together and decide whether we wanted to grow or not grow. And what was the best for our members. And that meant that we would not have the alliances that we had built in the years that we had been together, with—like Cleveland, that was the main office. That some people would lose positions as far as being president in their particular chapters, and stuff like that. But we came together. And even before, we all had—there's the Seattle contingency, and then the East Coast contingency, and you had that little thing going on too. But then we all came together on this one thing. And we went—I'll have to say---

This was at a national meeting when these decisions were made.

Yeah. We were at our national meeting, this was with all the different—four chapters, and we were at a nunnery in Virginia. So they were definitely serious about us making this decision. (laughs) And Debbie, I guess—

There was no place to go.

There was nowhere else—you can't go anywhere; you can't smoke, you can't drink, you can't do [anything] (laughs)—can't have no fun. But it was so emotional at the time, because it meant that we were going to lose some of the connections that we had built. We still have some lifelong connections with other people in the other chapters that were in the east coast. It just was very difficult. Because some positions had to—some people that were president in their own chapter, they would have to give that up. And I think it was the most courageous and the most unselfish decision that I think the leaders made, [that] time in Virginia. It was very emotional.

Were there pros and cons?

There were...about what?

About disbanding 925 as a district, a national union.

No, I think because some of the people that had been doing this for years—it's hard to let go of something that you've been doing for a long, long time and that you're used to, and that you would have to merge into another local and not have the same camaraderie as you had before. Or maybe not even have the same—whatever you want to say —"importance" as the officer in one local [as] what you were doing currently. But you

had to look at not just yourself, and that was the thing. We had to look beyond ourselves. Beyond our own personal feelings and wants. The main thing is we wanted to grow.

And why couldn't you grow as 925?

(sighs) Because we were so spread apart. We were all in different parts of the country. I think we had to break it up in that sense, and merge and have it in our own—to be more effective in our own states.

So it was part of what some of the discussions and debates were in SEIU as a whole?

Yeah.

The idea of uniting to be—

One whole. Yeah, a bigger union. And it seemed—it was the right thing to do, I think. In the beginning I think everybody was scared about it, or upset about it, because it was breaking us up. But not really. We didn't break up—we just kind of merged into other people, and all the 925ers that were in the other locals that might have went to other locals—I think we kind of bring our own little taste of 925 in each local that the different members have went to. Because we were strong women. The women that were there are very strong women. And I think they'll shine wherever they are.

How many women were there to make this decision?

20? 30 maybe? There were a lot of us. It was a very emotional—I think about 20 maybe.

And were you this chapter's president at the time?

I can't remember if I was. I might have been—yeah, I think I was. I might have been. Yeah, yeah.

I think Kim indicated that you were.

Yeah. I was, at that time.

When you are a chapter president, are you also expected to do your regular full time job?

Yes.

You don't get any relief?

No, we get no money. [ ] It was harder for me, because I was coming from Tacoma. It would be late nights, catch—and I live in Tacoma, and the meetings would be here, and

thank God they would take me down to the bus, and I'd get there on time, rushing to get to the last bus that would go. Or they would sometimes Kim would even drive me home. She would drive me all the way to Tacoma, if it was late enough. I could stay at Kim's house and go to work the next day, and stuff like that. But they made compensations for me that I truly appreciate.

How did 925 explicitly deal with issues around diversity, in the workplace, and in the union staff and leadership? Do you remember any of those discussions?

When I was president or vice-president, one of the two, I can't remember, it all kind of blurs in together, they were trying to—I kept bringing it up all the time about having—how do you approach certain members—because it's easy to approach someone that looks like you. But when you approach somebody that doesn't look like you, it's a little different. You're not as at ease. So one of the things I had done, I had had this workshop, it was for—and there were some people that came out of Canada, did this diversity-type training for our officers. And that was kind of controversial too, because not all of our officers came. But, I think it was a good training. They still talk about it. Dorney does, at least. She says, "Well, I haven't been to your kitchen,"—it was always like, bring someone into your kitchen and you can become friends. That was one of the things that came out of it. We always joke about that now.

Was that the first diversity training—

That was the first that I'd ever known.

And you were one of the people that got it going.

Yes. Yes. Yes. With Kim's help. She got the people from Canada that came down and helped with the training. They were very good people. We just didn't reach as many people as I wanted, as far as the officers—there was some resistance to it. But I didn't let that discourage me.

Then after that, we had an ethnic like Christmas dinner-type dance thing, which was very positive. It came off. I think now, as time has gone on, my thing is I've always talked in the organizing part of it. Before we've gotten all these organizing directors and all this stuff like that we have now. We've always talked about how do you approach certain people. Like wearing black armbands, to some Filipino people that's a negative thing—like in a campaign, maybe you want to wear a black armband. And we've tried to be more sensitive. I think that's come across more. I'm not so involved in the day to day local stuff, but it seems like there's—there is another African American president at the present; there are more African American people and people of color working for the contract campaign this time than I've ever seen before. So it's changing, slowly. But not as far as the local itself—I feel that they need more people of color in the office type, in the staff part.

What's the breakdown in the workforce at UW—do you know roughly? Is the second largest group after white, African American?

No, I think it's Asian Filipino, and then African American, I think it is.

Are there a significant number of Latinos now?

No. There could be at the hospital, not so much in the clinics per se. Where I work, there's more than—in my clinic, because I've been pushing for more African American and more people of color in our clinic, because we deal with a lot of—we have people of color in our clinic—a women's clinic. But I think in the workforce at the university per se, there probably is a lot of Latinos, but I don't know. Probably the food service, cleaning, that kind of stuff. It's like a trend.

Yeah, there are newer immigrants and they fill certain niches.

Yeah. Yeah. And it's like a trend. It used to be more Filipino people in housekeeping, but then more Latinos are coming in...

And moving up.

Moving up in time! It comes like a rolling type thing.

Is there anything more you'd like to add about the particular strategies and approaches to organizing that 925 had?

One thing I liked about 925 is that you could put out any idea. When we had meetings and strategies—and that means we'd have a flip chart, and you could put out any idea you want. [Doesn't matter] how crazy it was. We'd just put ideas out. Or how silly you might think it is. I never felt like I was not taken seriously, even though it might have been a crazy idea. They put everything up, whatever we'd think, and you'd put it up, and we'd actually hash it all out and think about it, talk about it, and everything. I think I never felt, and I don't think anybody felt in a meeting, especially in a organizing meeting, that your ideas were not taken seriously or not heard. Might not could do all of them, but you felt that you were heard here. I feel that people were heard.

Did 925 participate in other kinds of community activities? What other kinds of organizing were you aware of in the community?

We were doing the child care stuff—we were organizing child care workers—I got involved with that. In the early beginnings of child care, trying to organize the child care, we'd go down to different child care sites and hand out fliers, early in the morning, 7:00 in the morning, 6:30 in the morning, and hand out fliers. And that kind of makes you—and then I used to go to, as president of 925, I went to a couple of child care meetings, going there saying that we want to help organize you, and stuff. And that was separate from what we were doing here at the U, but we saw it as the same part of it. Because

they were working with state—it's about being with state employees—working with state —having state moneys and that kind of thing. And being involved in their part of trying to organize and get it all together and giving my view about how I felt when we first started, or as unit clerks, and how that happened, and then p and psr's and changing all the unit clerks to psr—that just finally happened.

What does psr stand for?

Patient service reps. The unit clerks became patient service reps and that automatically put them into the union. So that was a very good thing.

Did you participate in these things like the Central Labor Council?

Yes, I had to be on the Council. I went to a few meetings. It was very beyond me. It was mostly men; that's a man thing.

I see.

(laughs). I didn't understand all the issues from the other unions because they were more —it's all different unions. Though we did work together when we were campaigning for certain things in Olympia, where we came—

For example? Would they have been like...?

Yeah, stuff that as far as money going towards like health care and things that are general that would affect other unions that were not necessarily 925 or SEIU, that worked on the UW campus, we jointly would go to the legislature. Which was a fun thing, because we could have somebody—a guy standing there talking about insurance, and not just me standing there talking to my legislator, and saying, hey, he's having the same problems, though he's from a different union, this is serious to us and that's why we're coming together to talk to you about it. So that was a good feeling. I liked going around with other unions that aren't necessarily SEIU, and working together. That was a very positive thing.

Did you do quite a bit of lobbying there?

Every birthday—my birthday is February 17th—it was lobby day. (laughs) So, that was my day—it was normally a day we could take off, and I went down there. I took my daughter—my one daughter, she went a couple of times. She did one for a paper—she did her paper for her school. My girls—I have 3 girls—and they were all union. They knew all the union songs, came to the union parties, came to campaign, walked with me a couple of times, the last time with this collective bargaining I had my daughter drive me around a couple of times—very, very, very involved in it, because I was always gone. "Either come with me or you stay home." So you had to come with me and get involved with the union. So they were very involved in it.

One of my questions had to do with 925 being a family-friendly organization. I guess you found it was.

Very, very family-friendly. Yeah, I never felt that, when they could come on a campaign, they always were welcome, they were always—everybody was always happy to see the kids.

Did other people with kids come?

Yes. A lot of people with kids. And if you had—like if you even had a meeting, they would have day care for you. You had to have day care. It's always been very family-friendly. I never—I think that was one of the things they talked about, was about day care, if you need day care help, when I first started coming to the meetings.

Do you think the aims of 925 were realized? This is kind of a look at the organization nationally.

See, I wasn't there in the beginning. I think the aims in the beginning were the same as when we were—when I first started, was to—for all empowerment for women in the workplace. And I think they were, as far as I'm concerned. I feel like now there's more respect for me, because I was involved with the union. Even with my supervisors and managers and directors.. They know where I stand as far as workers, and that I'm for the worker. That because I'm for the worker doesn't mean I'm not for the employer. That I think I have more respect. And I think that's what they promoted. 925 promoted respect for the worker. And that's what I get now, I think because I've been involved.

Interesting. And the union is—you have a lot of members, because you have a union shop, and most people participate, I suppose, at some level?

[ ] members participation? I think it was more. I can't say how many. I think in the last campaign that they did, as far as the collective bargaining we had more people involved than we've ever had before.

Participating in that bargaining itself?

In the bargaining itself we had more people; on the bargaining team we had more people getting involved doing rallies and stuff like that than we'd ever before. The election, more people got involved than I've ever seen in this last—the presidential election. I think more people are aware because of our involvement and how we did get involved in all the different issues, especially the collective bargaining, how important that was, [ ] and not just 925 but all state employees.

What do you think about the legacy of 925? This is sort of a hard question, I realize, for the Seattle people, because for you guys, it's not over.

No, we're still going on. We still have 925.

You're growing and thriving. I was thinking about it nationally, I guess.

Nationally. What we left is just a seed to grow more. I think we have little seeds of 925 everywhere in every local that used to be District 925 members. Because I think what as being District 925 members, we were instilled a certain type of feeling about ourselves, and of ourselves as women and that what we see as the labor movement for women and how important we are, and that we can make a difference, in the union itself, in the larger union, and in the workplace. And the seed I think that we leave, that we've [left]—I guess the seed's in me because I've instilled it in my children. And I say it all the time. I say it to people all the time: you need to [stand up for] yourself. You need to know about your rights. You need to know that it's ok to speak up. I used to always say, "Well, you could fire me, because I can work 2 or 3 MacDonald's jobs, or I can go work out in the field if I have to. But I'm going to say what I need to say, because I have the right to say it. And I tell my kids that too. And I think that's the seed that they gave me, is that they've made me feel empowered, that I can go and do almost anything I want to do, anywhere I want. I can talk to anybody about anything. Especially about your rights as a worker. And I know how to read manuals and so forth. When they come out with a new policy, you just kind of dissect it. Those are things that I've learned, and so that's a seed that they've implanted in me to take on to other people.

And I think that's one of the legacies that 925 has left me and other people, is that we're out there [so we] can teach others, too. So now that they can be empowered, and they have the rights—rights—

Rights and respect.

That's right.

Roses, raises, I mean.

Specifically, I think they wouldn't have given us the responsibility to do a lot of things. They come to us when they want to try something new, especially if it has anything to do with organizing. Because I think we were the best organizers. I can say that. (laughs) I think we were the best organizers because we really believe in that. We believe in empowering the members to organize themselves, and to give them the tools to do that. And I think SEIU sees us not as the small little district any more. I think that we've been growing. I think Kim Cook has a lot to do with that. Her leadership has a lot to do with it. I really don't know. I think that they know that they can't discount us anymore.

You mean "us," meaning women?

Women. Women workers. You can't just look over us anymore. You can't make decisions for us any more. You have to take us seriously. We have power. I think they see that now. I don't know what statistics are about women organizing in the workplace and how we do, but I can feel here at University of Washington, that women make up

most of the workforce here. If they're looking at who are the up and coming unions, I think we're one of the ones.

Was there anything along the way that disappointed you about your experiences with 925?

I don't know. I think the only thing I guess that disappointed me is just people sometimes. You see things. Because I didn't have any idea what unions are. But the political in-biting, somebody trying to... I always say this about human nature, that somebody always wants to be on top of somebody, or wants to do better than somebody. And that's just human nature. So you have to kind of chuck that to human nature. But I was disappointed that there wasn't as—you know I had this glowing picture of kumbaya type-stuff all the time, but there's not always kumbaya. That was disappointing in the beginning, but I said you have to make it what you want to make it. So I worked around those people. Because there were some people that didn't particularly want me to be president.

You could just sort of feel it?

Yeah, I just felt it. I just felt certain people... but you just kind of work around that. I've had to work around a lot of things in my life, growing up as a woman, and growing up as an African American woman, so you just kind of work around it. You would think if we're women, that we should be able to deal with race and all of that. But what's there is prejudice everywhere, whether you're a woman, man, child.

Is that partly what you meant when you said at the very beginning of the interview, you started out so idealistic and then—

Yeah.

--as time went on you got more realistic.

Got more realistic or more—I don't know if it's realistic, or if I just—you know, people are going to be what they are. You're not going to change because you're just all women. You would think that it would. But some people go home and still have their ideals. Just become they come to a union doesn't mean they're changing everything—what they feel and think or what they grew up with. I've learned to either work around those people, or try to change their prejudices.

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

I wanted to ask this question about were there other kinds of activism going on in this city when you were most active with 925? What was the general political context of things. Were you aware of---

No, I really—

You were so busy that—

I always just thought it was us. (laughs) I mean, there probably were.

It probably was just you.

It was just us. But I'm sure there were nurses that were having some problems at the time. And they're in 1199.

I didn't even mean to limit it necessarily to workers' organizing. What other organizing, political organizing—

Political organizing. I really didn't pay attention. I do remember the nurses because I worked in the hospital and in the clinics and the nurses would talk about their little issues that they were having. Over the years, because at first they were downsizing nurses and stuff like that, and they were having their issue. But basically when I was in 925 it was all about what we were fighting about. And if that person was fighting for the same thing, "Yay, come on, get on with the rest of us." But I didn't really notice anything else at the time because we were always busy, it seemed like.

What was the experience working as a union president, activist, trustee—what did it mean in your life? You've certainly touched on this, but I like to ask it two or three different ways.

In my life it just meant that I had a responsibility to the members. They voted for me. So I felt I had a responsibility to do the best I can. It mostly during that time was contract negotiations. At that time it was mostly about trying to get what they wanted. We had surveys that went out, and we tried to get the best that we can. Fighting for better insurance coverage, and pay. It just meant to me that I had a responsibility. It affected my life in the sense that I was commuting back and forth and it took a lot of time from my kids, when I didn't—couldn't bring them—the meetings and stuff like that. When we did the merging, we had a lot of meetings with different unions, and having to put the time into that, and that was—though it took a lot of time from home, it was so important to me and it was something I just had to do. I didn't think I could not do it. The merging was so important for the future of 925 and for the future of Washington state employees, that I didn't mind it at the time because I knew what it was going to mean for our future and for state employees' future.

But you did feel a real pull sometimes between your responsibility to family—

Family.

Were family asking you, "Hey, Mom..."

Basically they were saying, "What time are you going to be home?" Because it would be late. And I wouldn't... They were older at this time, but "What time are you going to be home?" That was the big—because I didn't have really a life. I didn't have a social life. So it was like I was always going to—and then if I did have part of a social life, it was like, well, do you want to come with me, or we're going to be walking. (laughs) It was like, are you kidding, kind of thing. We're gonna be walking a precinct, do you want to come. Or ask the kids if they wanted to come. One would come once in a while. But you didn't have a social life. Not a real one. And you didn't do anything other than this, basically. You were just involved with the union and doing that--sometimes you have to make that sacrifice to get what you want.

District 925 was your identity, right?

Yeah, at that point. At that point, that was my identity. That's all I knew. That's all I was involved in and that's all I cared about at the time.

How many years do you think that lasted?

It had to be at least 10 years, because I've been at PSR for 10.

You got active early.

Yeah, it was early.

That you were elected to these different positions, one right after the other.

First one was a fluke, because Dorney wasn't supposed to quit. I was vice-president at the time.

Vice-presidents have to be elected too, though, right?

Yeah. I was elected. I was a well-known face. I think I got a lot of people to vote for me because they knew me, because I'd been at the U for such a long time. And I'd been in different places at the U. I worked in different areas all the time, so I knew a lot of people. They knew what I meant and what I stood for.

You talked about the merger. Now, do you consider that 925 merged, or you stayed--?

I say, that we came together. We stayed as 925. But I mean, when you talk to other locals that came together with us—in the beginning they didn't like that word: merging into 925.

Oh, so other unions came into you—other SEIU locals.

Um hum. That were similar aligned.

In education?

Um hum. And in health care and state stuff. We have some school workers and school bus workers. And they're working with—I'm assuming that they already got the Vancouver group in—I haven't read up on it. In the beginning it was very difficult because you just said merged, or I forget, there was another—

Unite.

Unite. That's a better word. We united.

You united to grow stronger. I've read your literature.

You're reading the literature? Yeah, we're re-uniting to grow stronger. And so it was very difficult in the beginning. It was a hard process to win over a lot of people because they thought they were going to lose. You have an ownership to a local that you're in. We have a ownership to our 925 because there's a history there. And so, we were saying, you're coming in to us because we were still going to have the name. But then—so they said, "Well no, we're going to have to call it 9 twenty-five. Not 9 two five." So there was a problem there in the beginning. Because I couldn't rid of the 9 two five.

A lot of folks here are still saying 9 two five, which confuses me, because out east we called it 9 twenty-five.

You did?

To distinguish it from 9 to 5, the National Association of Working Women.

9 to 5, the National Association of Working Women. Yeah. So when you come from one local to another local—in the beginning we had just one local, Local 6, that was coming, uniting, that we were uniting with in the beginning and trying to win them over to the idea, it was very difficult.

You were president then. You had to sort of talk to this other president who would no longer be president. Right? How did you--?

Well, Kim did most of the talking, but I was basically...it wasn't about your ownership of being a president. What is it? It's gonna be about... Because actually all the titles kind of went away after we merged. United. It's about the members. That's what I kept stressing on. To me, it was not about your personal stake in this. What is the bigger picture, and what is your members'. Because really, your members elected you, and they elected you to take care of them or make decisions that would benefit them. And you'd have to show me where this wouldn't be a benefit. Maybe to you it's not a benefit, because you'll be losing all this prestige and stuff like that, but really, you'll be gaining some prestige, because you'll be looked at, you're becoming a bigger local, you have

more power, and having more power means you have the ability to do better campaigning, maybe having more people take you more seriously than you would before. So having people give up that, that "position" thing—I put it in quotes because it's really not about the position, it's about your members and what you can get for them. And it was hard. We weren't getting paid for these positions. It's just a prestige thing. So having them give that up, that was kind of difficult. Pointing that out, over and over—you had to say it over and over again. This is about your members. This is about—we were making a lot of accommodations for different locals—you get to keep this and that. Because they all had their own little dues structure. But after two years we have to all become aligned and be the same—it's hard! It's amazing! It's work, you know. And you have these unselfish people that we were able to work together and get it going. I'm really proud of 925. Because we actually started the ball, and it makes me proud.

You're not so active now, you were saying.

No, I'm not.

You're still obviously a 925 member.

Yeah, I'm still a member, I'm just not as... I was on the board. I had to resign because of health reasons. I'm still a work site leader. I'm not a steward any more. I don't do—it was just taking—I'm absent too much right now, because I had a car accident about a year ago, and I've been having different surgeries that have arisen out of it. So my last surgery, in March, was on my shoulder. So I just felt like it wasn't fair, because I wasn't there, couldn't make the meetings. Because it meant that I would have to get off work, go out the shoreline, didn't get home 'til 10 or 11 o'clock at night.

Yeah, you do what you can do. Do you miss that a lot?

Yeah, I miss it in the sense that it always gave me a rush. I always liked the campaigning and all that stuff. Always gave me a rush. Always felt excited. And being around new people, younger people, and seeing those people get excited, you know, how I used to be, in the beginning, and having them realize that you can have power here. You do have power. And just seeing their faces. And just seeing how many more people are involved from when I first started out. It's just exciting. I miss that part of it. I miss the rush part of it. I don't miss the going back and forth, 2 or 3 meetings in a month. You have meetings at the workplace, and you have meetings at the council, then you have meetings at the board, then you have meetings at the homes. So it was a little difficult. Yeah, a lot of meetings.

Do you feel optimistic though about the future of the union?

Oh yeah. Well, I feel not only optimistic. I feel that if we don't have unions, that we're lost. [There need] to be unions to save the worker. We have to have them. We don't toot our horn enough, sometimes. Because this last collective bargaining that we got, I don't think a lot of people understand how important that was. Every day people. Even the

people that aren't even in the union, that are fair sharers. They don't understand the importance. I think we need to toot our horn more than we did. Get our raises, and... Really there should be something going off in the air right now. (laughs) Fireworks and stuff like that.

Was there something specifically significant that you achieved in this last one?

We got the first raise. And we hadn't had a raise in 2 or 3 years.

They were crying poverty, budget cuts?

Yeah, budget cuts. And they didn't have the money, and blah blah blah, and that they held their health care to a certain percentage that we were looking for. The whole deal about collective bargaining was the biggest thing, because we always wanted that. Just getting that portion of it was very important.

It was recently, getting the first collective bargaining.

Yeah. And we had been trying to get that for I don't know how long. That was one win, I thought. And then actually coming together with other unions trying to get the health care and the raise for people. That's a big deal. Like we've won. Yay!

Anything else at all you'd like to add, about the 925 story in your life, and its legacy.

No, the one thing I have to say is that I do miss the camaraderie we had in the beginning. It was close—we were really close. But we only came together maybe once or twice a year as the district. But I miss that portion of it. And I think that Debbie Schneider and Kim Cook and Dorney McKinsey have helped me to grow. As far as a woman, as far as in this union. And I appreciate everything that they've done for me, trying to keep me in and pushing me constantly. They've helped me learn a lot about myself and what I can and can't do. They've let me, this time, bow out. And I thank them for that. (laughs).

What a great ending!

END of INTERVIEW