John Cole

AFT Oral History Project

Q: This is Dan Golodner, AFT archivist, Wayne State University, Walter P. Reuther library. It is August 21, 2006. I'm in Austin, TX with John Cole with part of the AFT Oral History Project. John, why don't we just get started with where you were born and raised, and a bit about yourself.

A: I was born in Stanford, TX in 1945 when Stamford was then at the height, I think, of its prosperity. Stamford claimed to have 5,000 people. It's possible. My father's family, the Coles, were day laborers. They had been sharecroppers who were driven off their land by the depression, the Grapes of Wrath kind of people. They picked and chopped cotton. They didn't do anything else, but in those days, cotton was the crop, along with cattle around that area of Texas. The other side of my family were railroad workers. My great grandfather, who I knew quite well, and who I lived with for a considerable part of the time with he and my great grandmother, swung a nine pound hammer for eight hours a day for the Texas and Pacific Railway. He had come to Stanford building the first railroad there in 1904. And, when that task was finished, he stayed on.

They built a roundhouse in Stanford, which was part of the prosperity. A roundhouse is the place where the locomotives turned around, and also they did repair work on it. And, there were three cotton gins there at that time. That was big prosperity. My father was off fighting Japanese when I was born. So, my

mother was living with my great grandparents. Our house was at an intersection with two dirt roads across the street from a cotton field. It was a four-room house. But, the four rooms were tiny. My great grandfather built it with his own hands. He was about 5'2". He built it to scale, which meant it was the only place that I could feel tall. Whenever I stood up, my head did not hit the ceiling, but I hit the light fixtures, which were bare bulbs hanging down.

In many ways, my father's life and my life follow a trajectory that demographers would readily recognize in the post-war period. In this little small town my father saw there was no hope there for advancement whatsoever. In 1948 we moved to Abilene, which at that time had 40,000 inhabitants, and was a big city by our thinking. Like everyone in my family, My father had very little formal education. He officially dropped out of school in the seventh grade, but the truth is he hadn't attended school regularly. He never attended school for a whole year in his life. But, he had this incredible mechanical aptitude. When he was still in his early teens -- 13 or 14 -- he was working at a dairy in addition to picking cotton. And, as he walked to the dairy, he walked past the city dump. Someone had dumped a Model T there. So, he and his brothers dragged it back to the family home. And he scrounged parts out of the dump, and hither and yon, and rebuilt it, and got it running so that with nobody ever telling him what these things were or how it worked, or anything. He got this Model T up and running. He was at a gas station with it one day, and this guy was there in his Le Salle, which was a luxury car. It had broken down, and the guy was desperate to get to Shreveport because

of a family emergency, and the guy said to my father, "Kid, does your car run?" And he said, "Yes, it runs fine." He said, "All right, I'll trade you my LaSalle for your car." And, my father said, "I'm onto something here." So, he fixed up the LaSalle and got it running, and sold it for obviously a considerable profit.

When he went off to war, he already had sort of the genesis of a career in his mind, and in the Army he was in the Philippines. When the Japanese surrendered he got shipped off to be part of the Army of Occupation, which left him lots of time on his hands. So, he studied auto mechanics, and when he came back, got a job as an automotive mechanic, and eventually went on to open his own garage, and then eventually built a career rebuilding wrecked automobiles. Compared to the life my father led I had a sort of a blessed life.

I did have one shaping experience in that I was born with a birth defect. It's pretty mild. It's called a clubfoot, and my parents couldn't afford the operation to fix it. My father happened to be working with a Shriner, a guy who was a mason, who got me into the Shriner's Hospital for Crippled Children in Dallas. In those days, when you went to the hospital or something like that, you went for months. I was there for three months when I was three years old. It gave me an appreciation for I guess how well off I was compared to others. There was this one kid that had polio. Those were the days were polio was this terrible scourge. And this kid, he wasn't in an iron lung. I don't think they built iron lungs yet. But, he had a breather on his chest, and he couldn't move. All he could do was lie flat. I could

remember him calling out every 15 or 20 minutes all 24 hours a day, "Nurse, come turn me over." And then, there was this other kid that they brought in who had been horribly burned.

In Abilene, I got there at sort of just the right time. Abilene when I arrived was an oil and ranch town and banking center -- also a heavy dose of cotton farming. There was a lot of cotton farming going on. And, it was the banking center for the area. Abilene is in what is called west Texas. Now, my friends in El Paso make fun of that. Abilene's about 180 miles west of Dallas right at the break in the plains between arable land and desert, so that Abilene is on the average desert one year out of seven. If you drive west of Abilene, within 20 miles you're in bush desert territories. You drive east; it's pretty decent, and totally flat.

After I got there, Abilene hit a boom because there had been an Army base there, and the Air Force moved in. Dyess Air Force Base is still there. It went up to 100,000 people. There was a big population explosion. Of course, there was this demographic trend all over America of people leaving farms and small towns, and going to cities. It was definitely a southern kind of atmosphere when you're talking about race. There were not enough Hispanics there to mention. There were few blacks. They may have been 10% of the population. It's hard to say, but they were confined to a geographic area. There was a separate school for African Americans down near the Gooch packing plant where nobody wanted to be.

There were two school systems paid for with tax dollars. I don't know what the ratio would be. 80% perhaps of the tax dollars went to the white schools and 20% went to the black schools. I don't think that would be far off the mark. So, I had the advantage of being white, and getting really a top quality education. Also, it was the time when women didn't have many career paths open to them. Basically, if you were a talented women, ambitious, went to college, and wanted more than just to be a housewife, you could be a nurse, a secretary, or a teacher, with the result that some of the most talented, brilliant people you can imagine were teaching school, and doing it with a real conviction and dedication because they were not ordinary women in the first place in that they chose to break the mold and do something other than just stay home and keep house.

In those days, I like to say that those of us that were born in that era and born white Americans won the lottery of life. It was a setup for success, even for somebody who started in extreme poverty, as I did. The path upward was clear, and there was never any doubt, that if I applied myself and worked hard, I was going to be able to make it. I also was in the family business in my early years. I rebuilt my first car when I was -- my mother said I was 13 -- I remember it 14. My father felt that children should earn their keep. So, he put me in the family business pretty early on. Any time I wasn't in school, I was available to help rebuild cars. I also started driving a truck, hauling wrecked cars, when I was 14 even though I was not licensed to drive them.

By the time I got into teaching, I had already had a considerable career, in fact, 10 or 11 years in another industry. It helped shape my thinking about what was going on in education. I went to McMurry College on a music scholarship. There were three colleges in Abilene, still are -- they're universities now. McMurry, which is Methodist, Hardin-Simmons is the Baptist, and Abilene Christian, which is Church of Christ. I never considered Abilene Christian. Among other things, ACC students had to go to chapel everyday. Hardin-Simmons offered me a scholarship, but their claim to fame was the Cowboy Band, an all male band. In my experience in high school, they taught me that if you're ever on bus trips overnight, you wanted girls along. So, I didn't consider that one seriously at all. I went to McMurry, even though I was raised as a Baptist. Methodism was considered to be, like, a really liberal religion. I went to McMurry College, which turned out to be a wonderful experience. It's a small school. It still is. In those days, it had about 1,700 people, smaller than my high school. So, I had an opportunity for an outstanding education.

Q: What did you play?

A: I played the trombone. I was quite good. Later on, I took up guitar because all my friends were playing guitar. In the '60s, I did play briefly in a dance band, but it was at the end of when people wanted to hear big band music. They wanted to hear rock and roll. Anyway, graduating from Abilene, I went into teaching. I have to say there are other parts of my life that I did stupid things like get married too young. When I hear people talk about at-risk, kids I was one of

those, I think: I was one of those. I did every dumb thing you could imagine: brushes with the law, just...

So, I got thinking about my life, I've always had a theory that I had to try every wrong avenue first just to see that it was wrong before I'd finally catch up and grow. I went into teaching actually not out of any original conviction that I wanted to be a teacher, but because I'd calculated how much money I had saved up working. I had to let out of school and pay medical bills for a couple of years, my daughter was born very premature, and so I calculated up that because so many of the courses you would take for a teaching degree were, at the liberal arts school, the courses that everybody took. That meant that my freshman and sophomore years were loaded up with all the stuff that I could apply towards a teaching degree, whereas if I went into, say, pre-law, I'd have to take a bunch of other courses I hadn't had already. So that would string things out. I calculated out how much it would take, and decided that if I wanted to make the shortest, least expensive run possible to a degree, it would be as an English teacher, which I knew I did not want to really do. I wanted, if I was going to teach, to teach history, but I also knew that in Texas, if you teach history you have to coach, which I didn't want to do. So, that became the basis of this decision to become an English teacher.

I would have to say, also, in this era of people blaming the government for programs that they label as boondoggles and wastes of money, I would never have

made it without first National Defense loans, which covered my tuition in the later years. I had to drop out of the band after I got married and had a child, which meant I lost my scholarship. I had to work. So, I got loans for my tuition from the National Defense Loan Foundation, and then I got some outright grants and money from the Office of Economic Opportunity, which helped to pay for books and living expenses. The OEO grants didn't have to be paid back. Now, those programs I have think vanished.

Anyway, graduating from Abilene – let me back up. Abilene being Abilene, I mentioned the three church schools there -- I used to say, "In Abilene, not only was there a place for everyone in church, there was actually a church for every individual person", and the Church of Christ dominated -- very austere religion. There was no public swimming pool. They had a swimming pool at the college, but it had a board fence built down the middle of it so that the girls and boys would not mix. Their cheerleaders wore long pants, as did their drum majorettes on the band. Dancing was not allowed in Abilene in those days. It was dry town, no alcohol.

In 1968 I got into my first political activity when a closet moderate showed up as mayor of Abilene -- came from a really good family. Nobody can understand this. But without much thought or publicity he pushed through a city ordinance saying that blacks could live west of Pine Street, which then ignited a firestorm of protests. There were recall petitions circulated, and he backed off to the degree of

calling for a referendum on the topic. That was the first time I was ever active in any political things. But, it was in the air. This was '68.

Q: You're still in school right?

A: I was still in school, in college, working also. I called the mayor's office. He answered the phone himself. It was that kind of a town, and I said, "Hi, can I help?" So, I got involved in the referendum on allowing blacks to live west of Pine Street. That was my first political activism. We lost.

Q: Really?

A: Yeah, about 3-1. It was pretty bad. But, that and other experiences convinced me that what I wanted to do more than anything was get out of Abilene. When it came time for graduation, actually the school districts sent in recruiters, and I was recruited by a number of them. I accepted a position in Corpus Christi, which I had never seen. But, there were two things. One: it wasn't Abilene, and two, there was water. Corpus Christi's on the coast. I was fascinated by the thought of living where water was plentiful. In '69, I went to Corpus Christi and became a teacher. It was quite a culture shock. I got assigned, as most new teachers did, to a west side school, west side being where the African Americans and Hispanics were. When I got there, they were in the process of complying with a court order to integrate African Americans so that the school that I was assigned to, what the first thing they did, was they did one way bussing. They closed the black schools and bussed those kids out into the Hispanic schools.

So, the school that I was assigned to, which was designed for 750 had 1,400 students. My first year was so traumatic I had nightmares about it for years. (laughter)

Q: It was complete anarchy?

A: Yeah, and I'm handed the roll sheet, and I cannot read half the names. It seems like fully 50% of them were named Jesús and the other 50 were named Yolanda or something. But, they were actually Marias, Martinez, Esperanzas, Santiagos. I didn't speak any Spanish to speak of. I had not taken a foreign language in college. Here I was supposed to be teaching -- I think I had that year seventh grade English, eighth grade English, seventh grade history, eighth grade history, maybe doubling up on the seventh grade history. So, I'm supposed to be teaching in the English class, you know, how to write a paragraph in seventh grade English. We were supposed to read Charles Dickens' Christmas Carol. I remember that one.

Q: How'd that go over?

A: Well, the telling thing was I picked up the teacher's guide hoping for some direction, and the very opening sentence I'll never forget said, "When our students arrive at school in first grade, they already have a good working knowledge of oral English. It is our task to translate those skills into good writing and reading skills." I'm saying to myself, "Well, this book is not going to be much help." And, in fact, it wasn't. The Texas history book was worse. Among other things, it was blatantly racist. But, the variety of kids' reading skills ranged from no English whatsoever to pretty good, and everything in between. I had two kids

who had just arrived from Mexico, and I want to say it was the seventh grade English class.

Then I had kids who had learned English last year, some two years ago, and none except for the few African American kids that I had that year had English as a native language. Most spoke English as a second language, a term that didn't exist in those days. It took me a week or so to discover that the two Martinez kids who were brothers and sister in my seventh grade class didn't speak any English whatsoever. So, I marched down to the counselors' office and I announced indignantly that a mistake had been made, which brought a look of withering scorn from the counselor. I said, "Well, there surely has be some special class for these kids, and I was told, "No." And I said, "Well, what do you expect me to do with them in an English class when they don't speak English?" And she said, "Well, appoint a translator," as though that would solve the problem.

I went to a local bookstore and bought *Mi Primero Libro de Español* and *Mi Segundo Libro de Español* and a Berlitz book on how to speak English for Spanish speakers. I had those two students brought up to my desk. I picked this one kid I decided was pretty bright, and said, "Richard do you speak Spanish?" and he looked at me like I was crazy. I said, "Mr. Cole, I'm Spanish all over." So, I said, "Well, get the Martinez kids up here. Tell them that I'm going to teach them English this year, and they are going to teach me Spanish. Every Friday we

will exchange a list of words. I'll give them 20 English words they have to know, and they'll give me 20 Spanish words." And I began to learn Spanish.

It was definitely segregation at its most damaging. The dropout rate in that school I was told was 96%. They didn't keep, really, dropout figures, but I was told that 4% of our students would go on to graduate from high school, which comports with what I saw happening. The school was really pretty new, was only 12 years old, but it looked as though it was ancient. In fact, it was in pretty bad shape. We had two janitors for the whole school, and no air conditioning. This is in Corpus Christi, TX, where temperatures are in the '90s from April-October. But, I could say, OK, they don't have a lot of money. They can't afford air conditioning, but they wouldn't buy shades for the windows either, nor screens.

When you open the windows, I can still remember it. I would go in at 7:00 in the morning because it was a cinderblock building, all the things I'd taped up on the walls, my students' work that I'd put up there where somebody had done really good work would have steamed off overnight in the humidity. In Corpus Christi it's about 99% year round, and I would go in early, open up the windows, re-paste up that stuff, and I would look out the window, and you would see this cloud of mosquitoes slowly rising out of the grass, getting ready for the assault.

Q: (laughter) Were you pretty much flying solo, or did you have any support?

A: No, no support, none. It was strictly sink or swim. There were seven us of out of a faculty of 35 that were brand new that year. One did not make it until

Christmas. She threw her keys down on the principal's desk and walked out before the Christmas break. One left at mid-semester. One, my best friend that I had made on the last day of school had his car loaded and the trailer attached in the parking lot on the last of school. So, that left four of us. After three years, I was the only one left, which is not an unusual story for that sort of thing. Al Shanker used to say you get three kinds of teachers in schools like that. You get brand new teachers, incompetent teachers that nobody else wants, and a handful of missionaries. That was my experience. There was a small core of us that were there fighting the good fight, and a group of those that were there to collect a paycheck, and some that were there who -- it was embarrassing to watch them.

Q: But you managed to stick with it, and you became teacher of the year?

A: '74.

Q: '74?

A: Yeah. Well, you know what? Kids give you a good deal of credit for effort. I'm always embarrassed if I meet any of my ex-students that I taught in the first two or three years because I know I was appallingly bad. And, I felt it. I felt I was the worst teacher in the history of the world. I knew I was the worst teacher in the United States, and I wanted desperately to succeed in it. Just, it ate at me all the time.

Q: Sandra Feldman actually left.

A: Yeah, she quit, and had regrouped, and came back, same kind of a thing -- exactly the same kind of a story. It was devastating to want to do so well and try so hard, and now here's where my personal history comes into it. When I rebuilt

cars, nobody cared what I wore to work. They cared nothing about my religion or my politics, and in fact, many of the people I worked with in their personal lives were the scum of the earth. I worked with guys who had been in prison. One guy has shot his father and killed him. But, what they cared about was this: if we give you a car that's been in a wreck, and give you a reasonable time to fix it, does it run? And, can you tell that it was wrecked before? When you finish with it, does it look like it did before it was wrecked? That was it. That's the bottom line. So, you could tell the boss he was an SOB. In fact, I didn't, but one of my co-workers got into a fistfight with his boss, after which he said, "Now, do I still have to work on that damn car?" And the guy said, "Yes." "OK." So, they went -- (laughter) and it was all about production. "Can you produce? If you can, you got the job. If you can't, I'm sorry, you're a great fellow, we love you, you're fired."

When I got into teaching, I discovered it was the exact opposite. Nobody cared if I taught those kids a lick, nobody. What they cared about -- first of all, I had to look decent. I had to sign a pledge saying that I believed in a supreme being, which was a lie, but I figured if they were unscrupulous enough to ask a question, then they should expect to be lied to. There were limits to what you could do. It wasn't like in Abilene where you could get fired for being caught dancing, and it wasn't like they didn't fire women anymore for getting pregnant even if they were married, but still behavior counted for a lot. Most importantly, your book records -- and if you were unfortunate enough to have a fourth period

of class, locker records. Lockers were given out in fourth period, which was traumatic because if you had a seventh grade fourth period, they gave them these combination locks. So, you had to open, like, 30 combination locks for six weeks until they figured it out. They'd be coming at me, "Sir, this lock's no good. It won't work." So, I'd have to go out and open it. Then, another one would come in, "These locks: no good, it don't work." "OK." (laughter)

And, could you keep -I won't say order in the classroom. That was not necessary, but something less than a riot on a daily basis. The principal, bless his heart, was a wonderful guy, a sweet guy, but he did not get out and about and check on what was happening in the classroom. He probably didn't want to know. There wasn't much he could do about it anyway. If he fired somebody, he always had to figure he was going to get an incompetent or something worse to replace him. So, what's the point? That was very demoralizing. But, most demoralizing was just watching those kids get ground up, and watching otherwise intelligent, capable young people, headed for what you knew was going to be a grim future with nothing to do about it. The books we were supposed to use were inappropriate. The Texas history textbook had a picture of smiling blacks in a cotton field with a caption that said, "Most slave owners treated their slaves well." That was one example I remember.

Q: And these weren't new books, too?

A: Oh, God, no. These books had been used -- I used to say that I was lucky teaching in the Brown schools because we got the books just after the whites had

discarded them. After we got through with them, then they went to the black schools. These books were so filthy from having been handled. You know that part where you write, "This book belongs to..." had been written in, crossed out, pasted over -- I mean, these books were 20 years old, falling apart -- I would get sick in those early years going down to check out those books because they were covered with mold and mildew and filth.

In both classes, English and history that I taught throughout my career, I ceased using the textbooks as soon as I could. Now, one of the things when you start teaching is you don't have anything else. You haven't built up a stock, a library of teaching tools, which experienced teachers have. But over time I built up my library. I scrounged through used bookstores, went through the warehouses where they kept textbooks that were out of adoption, and found there was a chapter here, or a unit there I could use. These would be classroom sets. There wouldn't be enough of them to give to the students to take home, which is just as well, since expecting those students to do homework was dreaming. That was one of my early lessons. You're talking about kids who might be living in a three-room house, what are called shotgun houses. They have living room, kitchen, and bedroom with 10-12 people in it. A kid has no place to do his homework. The TV's blaring till -- in those days -- until it went off at 10:30, now, I guess, 24 hours a day -- noise, and plus they had duties of their own. If they were old enough to be in junior high school, when they got home, the girls were helping cook and clean. The boys were likely to be pulled out of school to go

help on a roofing crew. It was impractical in the first place to expect a lot of homework. So, I created my own curriculum. You couldn't do that these days.

Q: You had no choice but to do this.

A: Right. Once we got this assistant principal -- a real jerk later on in my life when I was junior president I took him on in a very high profile case. He came down and said, "It's come to my attention you're not using official state textbooks." And I said, "That's correct. The official state textbook is useless." And he said, "Well, that's the law. You have to use it." So, I said, "OK." So, I handed them out to the students according to form, told them, "Take these, put them in your locker, do not take them home. Do not bring them back to class until I tell you to, which will be the last day of school. You have no excuse to lose this because you're not going to touch it again from now until I get it back." And then, I told the assistant principal, we've assigned every student a textbook. It was from that experience that the unions sprang, not just mine but other teachers involved. There was a lot of turmoil in Corpus Christi in those days. The school district had been declared in violation of the law insofar as African Americans were concerned. But, they refused to integrate the Hispanic schools. They fought two cases to the Supreme Court. The first was that they didn't have segregation for the Hispanics, which they lost. A second case was the Hispanics were not an identifiable ethnic group, which they lost.

Finally, in 1975, the district began integration of the Hispanics with the Anglos through a program of bussing. That was the same year we started the

union. Myself, Linda Bridges, the President now of TFT, and a group of others were leaders in an independent organization called the Classroom Teachers Association. In 1974 this guy was elected president of Classroom Teachers Association who was a dedicated believer in trade unions. The Classroom Teachers Association had a loose affiliation -- very loose, with a state organization -- the Texas State Teachers Association, and even looser with the NEA. You didn't have to be a member of the NEA, or TSTA to be in the Classroom Teachers Association.

The NEA was trying in Texas to move in, and affiliate the TSTA, the Texas State Teachers Association as a statewide group, and then impose mandatory -- what they call unified membership. To belong to one, you have to belong to all throughout the state. We were, or at least I was, blissfully unaware of any of those things. We were just dealing with things in Corpus Christi, and trying to make the organization act like a union even though frankly, I had no predisposition towards unionism. In fact, I was rather hostile. Based on my upbringing in Texas, I never heard two good words said about them. It also is true that I just assumed that professions improve themselves by forming unions, and it's sort of a necessary evil.

Q: OK, so you saw unionism as even for teachers as a necessary?

A: Yeah. I never understood all the distinctions people would try to make about the Bar Association, AMA. I still don't. The word games that got played, to me professional people formed organizations, and worked together to try to

improve the profession, and the industry in which they worked.

The AFL-CIO was a total unknown to me. I wasn't all that positively disposed towards it either. But, others around me were. What I did believe was an act of aggressive action to try fix some of these things we were dealing with. Now, the union began in the west side schools mostly.

Q: The really hardcore schools that needed help.

A: Right, right. These were teachers who were idealists by large. They were people who believed in education and believed in the equality of peoples, and didn't understand how a group calling itself the school board could just write off children right and left. Now, at the same time, this being early '70s, our school board in Corpus Christi had been taken over by George Wallace Democrats. They called themselves the concerned neighbors, and their one issue was school bussing. Now, the real issue was integration, but school bussing was the hot button word. Six out of the seven school board members were active in that organization, and the seventh, though not active in it, was sympathetic. We didn't know at the time we started the union just how bad the problem was. None of us had been -- well, not none of us -- some of us I guess, but I hadn't been active in politics in Corpus Christi except for the sorts of things I thought were my duty like being precinct chair, and attending the conventions, and things like that.

Anyway, one of our numbers, the guy I pointed out there, had been to an NEA convention. He was one of those that had joined NEA where he saw Al

Shanker in action, met with AFT activists, and was very impressed. He also met with an organizer for an organization called the National Coalition for Teachers Unity, which I later learned was a front group AFT was paying to try to bring about mergers between NEA and AFT around the nation. He came back and said, "You know, we should affiliate. Would you make our organization into a union? We should affiliate it with both NEA and the AFT." This was an independent group, bear in mind, that...

Q: You're trying to tackle everything at once there.

A: Yeah, '74-'75, we had no idea what we were getting into. '74-'75 school year, we had carried the elections in our independent organization. He was the president.

Q: Do you remember his name?

A: George Kirk. And, we took to our representative assembly a motion that we affiliate dually with the AFT and the NEA. And, we passed it. Well, after that, the anti-union folks and the pro-NEA folks got all in a dither and then followed spring of '75, a flurry of events.

They insisted that we've done that vote without proper notice, etc. So, we called a second meeting, passed the resolution again overwhelmingly. Then, we showed up at our monthly representative assembly, and there were all these TSTA and NEA staff people there. We were caught totally by surprise, and the next thing we know, motion had hit the floor calling for our impeachment, which failed by one vote. It was a meeting I remember vividly, because as people, as they will,

were getting up and leaving the meeting. The NEA staff people were picking up voting cards and voting. Then, that motion having failed, I always joked about this one guy who had to go to the bathroom. While he was out, they moved since they couldn't impeach us, to request us to resign. That motion passed by one vote. We took them up on it just to be blunt. We said, "All right. The NEA does not want us. We'll start on the AFT level."

Q: Just like that?

A: Pretty much. It was not our intention starting in that process to do that. In fact, up to that point we had rejected the in terms of starting an AFT local. But, it was clear that we were not going to be able to operate inside that independent organization with NEA and TSTA staff people down there organizing against us. Now, at that time, that independent, out of 2,100 teachers in Corpus Christi had 1,400 members. Since we had been acting like a union, we had irritated the administration. We had filed grievances. We contested terminations. We'd embarrassed them. There was onecase that was a school in Corpus Christi, Shannon Junior High, that everybody knew was out of control. The principal was…his wife had died, he was heartbroken, and he was just nonfunctional. Coincidental to this, there was this young coach who had been hired as a tennis coach. He had taken his tennis team in Victoria to the state championships. And, CCISD had hired him. He moved to Corpus Christi, and then the usual Byzantine political games within the coaching ranks occurred -- and he found when he got to Corpus Christi, having signed a contract, sold his house in Victoria, that he was not going to be assigned to be a head tennis coach, but instead was going to teach

junior high football at Shannon, which did not make him happy. He went about it the best way he knew how, and Shannon actually had a winning record for the first time in many number of years. But, at Shannon, the discipline situation was unbelievably bad. And, among other things, the solution to the discipline problems was to have kids sent to the tennis court to stand around. This is a tennis court where our coach could have been conducting lessons. Meanwhile, the kids out there are being sent to the tennis court. They're smoking; they're passing dope; they're having a good time.

One day, two troubled kids that he'd had trouble with consistently, got in a fight in his gym that he went over, broke it up, and one of them slugged him in the process. He yanked them up by the collar, and dragged him down to the principal's office, kicked the principal's door (laughter) in, threw those two students in, and said, "If you'd get off your ass and do your job around here, we wouldn't have these kinds of problems." Not the most delicate way of dealing with the situation, even though he probably was accurate in his assessment. The principal moved to fire him, of course. We insisted on a public hearing, which you had then and have now the right to in Texas. I always said, "Teachers don't have many rights in Texas, but they have the right to be raped in public if they choose to do so." So, we had a lot of fun. We hired a photographer, for example, because we knew what they would do. And, the principal said, "That's not..." -- when we talked about the tennis court, "Well, that's not true. We don't have this." Then we'd have our witness photographer. "Are you a photographer?" "Yes."

"Did you take this picture?" "Yes." "What is it?" "This is the tennis court at Shannon Junior High." "And, what are those?" "Students." "Well, what's that one doing?" "He's smoking something. I think it's pot." (laughter) Whereupon the school board closed down the hearing, threw everybody out including our attorney, and then voted in secret to fire the person.

Things like that had been going on. Now, this independent association had an agreement with the school board which was designed to keep the union out, both NEA and the AFT, frankly -- more the NEA than the AFT. It gave them exclusive rights and exclusive -- collective bargaining for teachers is illegal in Texas, and it was then. But, this agreement gave the Corpus Christi Classroom Teachers Association the right to consult exclusively with the school district. This right had been conferred upon them with teachers having no voice in the matter, and just then designated as that. But because of the way we've been acting, the school board decided it was going to punish the Classroom Teachers Association by taking that exclusive agreement away.

All of this was occurring during the spring of '75. And, they subsequently did do that. The first time I ever picketed any place was because we organized a picket to protest them taking that agreement away. I did not speak to the school board that night, but others did, including a state representative who said, "You're going to regret the day you did this because you're going to let the union in."

Q: It seems like they poisoned the well.

A: Oh, yes. We started the union -- actually, we started organizing in the summer of '75. We formed an organizing committee --

END OF AUDIO FILE 1

A: ... and I was the first member, which is based on the fact that at our first meeting where our union organizer was present from the AFT someone produced a big chief tablet, and said, "We, the undersigned, indicate our intention to be members of the Corpus Christi American Federation of Teachers," and I was the first person to sign it. So, there were 17 of us at that meeting. That first summer, I was so excited about all this, and it was frustrating because school was out. We couldn't talk to anybody about it. So, I hit up on the idea. I just started calling people I knew, and saying, "Let me come over and talk to you. We're starting a union."

By the end of the summer, Linda Bridges, a couple of other people and I went around to people's houses and signed up a couple hundred people as sort of members, based on $10 pledges. And then, in October of '75, we got our charter from the AFT, local #3456. From the first, unlike a lot of groups that I've seen organized, we did not think that we were going to be the alternative voice or the dissident voice, or the leaven that raises the loaf. We wanted to be "the" group, be the exclusive representative, and bargaining collectively, even if the law forbade it.

So, we started organizing with that idea in mind. CWA gave us office space for virtually nothing. The Letter Carriers had a secretary, and she let us run an extension of the phone into her office. So, it sounded like we had a secretary. The steelworkers were the union that had actually filed a lawsuit that forced integration because it was there members involved. They were, in the early days, role models, support structure, mentors -- they were mostly almost all Hispanic, and they found it immensely funny to play a game called, "Let's get the gringo drunk," and take them around to these nightclubs where I was pleased that I had steelworkers with me. They thought it was funny, too, that I was the gringo that spoke Spanish, or something like Spanish. I never claimed to speak real Spanish. Having learned it the way I did, I'm pretty darn good with teenage slang circa 1970's. And, I've found that I can communicate to Spanish speakers anywhere in the world, but it's strictly informal Spanish.

Q: How did you sign up these members?

A: It was tough.

Q: What were you saying to them to give this donation of $10?

A: Well, the first year it was $75. The $10 was we were going to form a union. It's time we did something.

Q: And they were mad enough to sign up. They had no idea...

A: Yeah, well, it was easy in the early days. The $10 will give you that. But also, everybody knew that this school district was being run by a people who didn't care a lick about educating the majority of the students. They had done just

outrageous things. They had a bond issue to fix -- trying to placate the courts -- to fix up some of the west side schools. An example, the school next door to where I taught -- I taught at Barnes Junior High. Lorenzo de Zavala Elementary was housed in barracks that were donated by the naval air station after they had gotten to the end of World War II. So, this was 25 years, 30 years later. So in about three schools in barracks like that -- anyway, they put a bond issue to do that, and bond issue to build a new administration -- well, the voters approved the bond issue to repair the schools. They voted down the administration building.

The next thing that happened was the school board voted to build the administration building, and in fact bought a bank building. Some bank owner needed a bailing out, I think, and did not fix up the decrepit schools. So, there were a lot of things going on like that in the community, and there was a lot of anger from the community at the school board. But, the school board elections were dominated by the George Wallace crowd. Nobody even knew there was an elected school board, frankly, apart from the same thing that's happening now with the fundamentalist Christians, and the State Board of Education in Texas. People vote for a State Board of Education member not knowing that they're doing it, really. They just vote the straight republican ticket. And, you wind up with these -- I don't know how to characterize it.

Anyway, when we started the union, we had this enormous assist from the unions. They were efffusive in their generosity and willingness to help.

Q: This is your first exposure, then, to actual --

A: Yes, now, I'll tell you a story. This is life-shaping moments. The first labor council meeting, Baldemar Garcia and myself had been elected to delegates. George Kirk, by the way, we had planned to make the president of this new union. But George got accepted into law school, and decided it was an opportunity he could not let pass. So, he left. Being president of the local union was not something I wanted -- nobody wanted. It devolved upon me after a discussion among a group of us in which it was like, "Here, you do it." "No, you do it." And, I finally protested less. Certainly, it was not a career-advancing move. I mean, everybody knew this is the end. You're dead as a teacher once you do this. They're going to come after with both barrels, and if they get you, no other district's ever going to hire you. Forget it.

Anyway, Bo Garcia and I were elected delegates to the labor council. So, we go to the labor council, and this is the year that the busing starts for integration. Now, the building trades -- being building trades people -- were not happy with this development. The steelworkers of course had sued the district to bring on this development. Now, Bo and I had decided wisely we would not speak for the first three meetings. We had conferred and said the smart move is to see how things go. So, we decided keep our mouths shut -- nothing for three meetings at least until we figure out what's going on.

In his first meeting, there is a heated discussion, a guy from the

boilermakers gets up and he says, "They're telling me I've got to bus my kid across town, and you steelworkers -- you're the ones that did that." A steelworker is standing up, "Well, they told my kids she could not have a college prep course because they don't offer them in Moody High School." "Where were you...?"

Q: Back and forth?

A: Back and forth... But, the thing that I remember about it was the president of the labor council's name was Manuel Yzaguirre. This black guy gets up raises his hand, gets called on, Willy Fleming, and he starts off by saying, "Brother Ezagara," -- he had a creative pronunciation of his name -- and just a light bulb went off. I'm in a room where amidst this heated debate, a black man is calling a brown man his brother. I said to myself, "You know, I've done the right thing." Up until that moment, I was very much in doubt that what we were doing was the right thing. But that, plus the inevitable moment came when after they'd all yelled at each other, somebody said, "I move we adjourn for the bar." And then everybody went over and had beer.

To be in that world with the heated racial tensions in Corpus Christi at that time, and nationally, we should not forget what it was like with Richard Nixon and Spiro Agnew going around enflaming people's passions. It was part of their southern strategy, using code words. And, you had George Wallace, who in '68 had carried off the best third party candidacy since Theodore Roosevelt, and he had been campaigning up until he was shot in '72. You had all that passion and divisive rhetoric floating around, and here's this guy saying, Even in the midst of

a floor fight, "Brother Ezagara...", and just concentrated I guess all I believed into a moment's flash.

So, you were asking about signing up members. It was hard. We had a big debate about whether -- because the school district wouldn't let us use payroll deduction of course. It wouldn't let us talk about the union on campus. We couldn't hold meetings. Some principals were pretty aggressive in telling people they shouldn't be a member of the union. I had entered into negotiations with the school district to gain payroll deduction, and we had a campaign going to get the right to use payroll deduction for union dues. I had a group of English teachers, and we would write letters saying that teachers should have this right. And then, I would take the letters to the labor council, and get them to take them to the plant, and get people to sign them. That school board, if they had ever gotten one letter a year on any political issue it was a lot. Suddenly, they were getting 100 letters each daily, demanding that teachers be given payroll deduction. They didn't know what the hell was going on. We got teachers to donate envelopes, and stationery so every letter was unique. I typed up hundreds myself -- typed them, handwrote some with my left hand, typed them, misspelled words deliberately, and I was in negotiations with the administration on getting that privilege.

I had a great technique. Somebody in history, some diplomat, must have used this. But, I would come to each meeting with an agenda, and the agenda would be the things I would want to talk about: payroll deduction, maybe a

problem at a school, and I would meet with the assistant superintendent, and he, of course, from his point of view would present things that he wanted to have us talking about. And, on the payroll deduction, he kept saying, "Well, we need a list of your members. We want to have a membership list, a copy of your Constitution," this and that. At the end of every meeting, I would get him to sign my agenda so that I had a nice paper trail of all the meetings we had on these things. And then, I would send a memo after every meeting saying, "Here are the things that I believe we have agreed to." I always left out anything that he brought up. It was all stuff that I brought up. And, it took him several months to snap to the fact -- and I remember one meeting he said, "I know damn well we talked about that." And I said, "Well, it's not reflected in any of these documents." But, he thought he was playing the cool administrator, and they're experts at giving you the false impression they care about what you've said and that they're going to do something about it.

Anyway, the big internal fight we had was over giving the district a list of our members. If you're going to get payroll deduction, obviously you do have to give a membership list. How else will they know who to deduct? And, there were people saying, "I'll quit. I don't want anybody to know I'm a member." And, we had a membership meeting. And, to my surprise, the membership voted overwhelmingly to turn over the membership list.

Q: What year was this? This was just through the next year, '77-'78?

A: No, this was during '75-'76.

Q: Oh, still, OK...

A: So, but signing up people that first year we had to get to pay cash, or automatic bank draft, which is a pain in the neck or monthly billing, which is worse. So, whatever our membership officially was, it was always really less because you'd get people who signed up, promised to pay you, and they'd didn't, or they were on bank draft and then they'd change banks. So, they got divorced or they got married.

The administration finally came out with what they thought was really going to be the deal killer on the payroll deduction. "We'll give you a payroll deduction, but you have to get a certified public accountant to verify the membership list, and give us a statement that it is an accurate list." And, they just were confident we would say, "No." But instead, we said yes. And, one of the school board members happened to be a CPA. So, we hired him to verify the list so that there would be no way the administration could challenge the validity of the list. The administration was totally taken aback by that.

That was a big turning point. We got payroll deduction, and I would say that was the '76-'77 school year that that occurred. Also that year, that first year we started out, had the 17 famous people who signed the pledge to start the union, and at the end of that first year, we had about -- when everything was said and done -- 265 paying dues members.

Now, AFT in those days was just a very different organization. There was no research department. There was no Educational Issues department. There were no regional directors. You had the Southern Organizing Project headed by Gene Didier. That was that. We were in that project.

So, I wrote to Gene Didier an application for a grant so that I could be a full time president. After the first year of union the school district, in an effort to punish me and the other naughty teachers at Ella Barnes, first of all they announced they were taking away my student teacher, which was irritating, and that they were closing Barnes as a junior high, and reopening it as an elementary school, and that the faculty at Barnes would be scattered. Now in their mind, they were going to bust up this union hotbed. The actual effect was as if they kicked a dandelion. The seeds went everywhere. For the first time, we had people on the south side who were activists. I was applying for a grant knowing that my job was gone, and I was going to have to go somewhere else, and see if somebody would take me. But also, by that time, I'd become convinced that if we were really going to make this thing happen, we had to have a full time union president, and somebody had to take the plunge. My salary at that time was about $12,600. So, I asked for a grant of $7,200 just based off of, "This is the least I think I could get by with," not knowing how -- you know, I should have asked for $25,000 and let them haggle me down.

The story now gets more complex in that the Texas Federation of Teachers

gets involved. In those days, when we started in Corpus Christi, Texas Federation of Teachers had 300 members roughly. So, they're looking at a local with 265 members coming into the organization. The president at that time felt very threatened. You can imagine that the other people encouraged her to feel threatened.

TFT actually opposed my getting this grant. But, the Director of Organizing for AFT in those days, John Schmidt and Gene Didier, the Director of the Southern Organizing Project both had an intense dislike for the TFT president, June Karp. So, they gave us a grant of $9,000 even though we'd only asked for $7,200. Gene only said, "It was the only time we ever gave anybody more than they asked for," which I took the $7,200 in salary and used the other $1,800 we bought. We had a hand-cranked mimeograph that we bought. We later bought one with a motor, and some other things like that. (laughter).

Q: You guys were big time now.

A: Yeah, that's right. Well, one thing I should also say as part of our legend we were running everything on less than a shoestring. Linda Bridges got the idea of going to a local printer and saying, "Hi, I'm a teacher." True statement: she was still teaching. "You know, teachers need paper, and I know you have lots of scrap paper leftover when you cut things. I'll be grateful for any you will give me." So, they did. Now, this paper was not 8 1/2x11white paper by and large. What printers get are these big sheets like tabletop size, and then they cut them, and sometimes they have strips left over. Sometimes these were 3 1/2x14, and

sometimes the paper was fluorescent bumper sticker paper, and sometimes it was check paper, whatever they had leftover. Sometimes it was 3 1/2x5.

But,using that hand-cranked machines, I always said, "If you can hold it down, we can mimeograph it on that thing." You could take that handle and just hand-feed stuff through there. So, we had publications coming out, fluorescent orange, 3 1/2x14. We designed the fliers to fit the paper. Like, one of them had a big giraffe's head saying, "Take a long look," you know?

Eventually the school district called the printer and said, "What the hell are you doing?" And they threw us out. But, that was OK because then Linda and I would go to their dumpster, and I can still remember, she was shorter than I was. I would help her onto the hood of her car, and then she's stand on my shoulders and lean in, and grab paper, and throw it out. We put out tons of information to those teachers, and nobody had ever given any information to them about the school board. After every school board meeting, we put out a report so that the names of those school board members would be etched in their mind.

"Here's how they voted," we'd say. We were there every meeting, and we were presenting carefully chosen issues so that we weren't just there saying, "I want more money." One of the first issues we did was discipline and safety. We did reports on how many teachers have been beaten up this year, how many students had been beaten up, and then we would tell the school board, "We want

you to do something. We want you to put this on your agenda." The school board members in the early days were stupid enough to talk back to us. The superintendent was too. They would in public call me these awful names, but the teachers were reading this stuff, and they're saying, "And, when he said that the teachers beat up -- the superintendent said he's a rabblerousing liar, you know?" So, we did public hearings where we invited the public to come, and we chose air conditioning, school safety – I think there was a third one, I can't remember. But, school air conditioning was one of our early campaigns, so that, again, in the eyes of the public, we wouldn't be just there with our hands out asking for money all the time, and we always, carefully, if we identified a problem, we proposed a solution. For school safety and discipline we proposed alternative schools. We said, "We don't want you to kick these kids onto the street -- build an alternative school for kids who can't get along on a regular system."

And, by God, in some cases, the pressure built, and they did what we had suggested. So, we had open hearings, and we'd invite people to come. It was kind of scary. I can remember sitting at one of those, turn to the secretary treasurer and I said, "You know, there's no door behind us. We've got no way out of here if a bunch of nuts come in here and wants to lynch us." It turned out the public was eager for the opportunity to come and say something. I remember a state representative coming and saying, "Why hasn't the school district been doing this? Why is the teacher union having to do this?"

In the minds of the teachers, we're building up this image of a group that tells them what's going on. It's there fighting and getting abused on their behalf. For me, I loved it when the superintendent or school board member would take a shot at me, because I knew that every teacher out there would just be steaming when they heard about that.

We had a pretty high profile case. They refused to let us present grievances. I went through this drill where I would go to grievance hearings and be thrown out, which was OK too. We were going to lose the grievance under the system they had anyway. Eventually what we did was build a case to go to court. We did go to court, and we did win. It's a Supreme Court decision. I've forgotten what they call it, but when attorneys want to look up precedents set in cases, it's got its own key number. It's the decision that says that school employees have the right to a union representative in a grievance.

In fact, one of these pictures I saw flipping through here, that was the attorney, and that's the lady that filed a grievance. We had a problem in that once they snapped to our strategy, they started settling grievances. So, we had to file a grievance that we knew they couldn't settle, and so she, LeNell Couteau, who was a tough woman, filed a grievance against the superintendent knowing there's no way he's going to settle this. We went to court over that. I used to talk about when we went to court over the grievance issue. I didn't call it going to court over the grievance issue. I called it the superintendent's trial. We accused the

superintendent of breaking the law. His trial was set for September 5. (laughter) The superintendent lost his trial. He's appealed. (laughter) And that, of course, made him -- you know that those things got delivered to him, and I'm sure made his day...

AFT gave us the grant. Within about two weeks after being told that the AFT had given the grant and I was full time then I got a call from Phil Kugler, who was at that time some functionary in the organizing department, whose job it was to round up formula reps, if you're familiar with that term. He told me I was going to Cincinnati, OH to participate in a collective bargaining election. I had never heard of a collective bargaining election before, and that turned out to be another one of those life changing episodes. Two reasons: first is I met the woman I later married, who was the vice president of the union in Cincinnati, and in charge of the building rep structure. And, the second is when I saw the process, the pieces fell together. I'd always known or felt that the school employees needed to have a representative, a union, but it was just kind of a vague thought. And then, suddenly, the power that is conferred upon a group by being elected by their constituents to represent them suddenly flashed for me. It was like, "Ah, I get it." It's the same power as what drives American democracy. The fact that you've been elected confers something on you that's more than just the vote count.
I came back from Cincinnati after that bargaining election, and convened my executive board, and I said, "I have been to the mountaintop."

Q: Cincinnati? (laughter).

A: Yeah, and, "I have seen the promised land." I told them we were going to have an election here in Corpus Christi. We're going to win that election, and then we are going to bargain for these teachers. In those days, it was just teachers. That was '76.

Q: And, Cincinnati was kind of similar to your leadership because --

A: They had a tough time. They had a strike early on to force the election. Then, the school board cleverly said, "OK, call the election while they were out on strike." Then, there was a second election where the union narrowly lost, and then it was a third election that I participated in that actually won.

Q: Here's kind of the young Turks taking over also.

A: Yeah. Well, the guy that was president when they won was Roger Stevens. Roger was a type that's pretty common in the union movement. Very frequently, the guy that starts the union for you is not the guy you want having to head it up after any period of time at all. Roger started the union when he went to Chicago, and saw there the AFT national headquarters, and walked in, and picked up a brochure. The way we won the third election was Jerry Byrum convinced Roger that if he came out of his office during the campaign, Roger would be dead. Jerry was going to kill him with his own hands…because Roger was given to off-the-wall kinds of things. I always say in the union business there needs to be usually two people, like the drum major leading the parade, and somebody that comes along behind and sweeps up after the elephants. You very seldom find the same person with both capabilities -- different types almost. I found that to be the case all over in organizing. If that second person isn't there -- if all you've got is

that first person, the visionary, you're probably doomed to failure.

Now, in Cincinnati, Sharon was the person who swept up after the elephants. She was willing to take a back seat, didn't have the ego problems about it, let Roger get all the glory, and then she made all the phone calls -- massage people's egos, restore their hurt feelings, did all the things that had to be done to keep the organization going. Then later, Tom Mooney came along, because Roger -- this is also pretty common -- the guy who maybe is the person who leads you to victory in obtaining bargaining, may not be the guy you want running the union over a long haul. It was two different kind of skill sets there too. Tom came along and defeated Roger in about '78.

Q: '79.

A: '79? Yeah, because Sharon and I were already married. She was living in Corpus Christi because Roger called down and asked her to come up and manage this campaign. She said, "What, are you crazy?" (laughter) Sharon always claims credit for identifying Tom, because when she was head of the building rep structure, he was one of the area coordinators.

Q: He says that, yeah. So, you saw the mountaintop, came back down...

A: Yeah, so then it became, "How are we going to do this thing? We know we're not going to do it legally. There's no law." I saw several things we had to do simultaneously and some consecutively. Simultaneously, we had to educate the public, educate our members -- well, not just our members -- the whole teaching force on what we were trying to do, and gain their support for it.

Politically, we had to build a powerbase to get rid of those people on the school board, and replace them with people who believed in it. So, that had to be going on pretty much simultaneously, then consecutively. Well, and plus building our membership base -- at that time, we had about 400 members by then. But, the Classroom Teachers Association had about 1,200. One of the nice things about the CPA requirement, when they required us to get our membership certified by CPA, they required it of our rival organization. We had very good information about membership figures. In fact, the newspaper used to print it like a little news story: AFT Up, CTA Down -- and that was the headline. Even though they still had 1,200 and we had 400, the headline was, "Union Membership Doubles, Association of Membership Drops." But, obviously we didn't figure we would get our majority to join, but we wanted a better ratio before we had the election. So, that's got to go on. Then, in sequence, we also had to get things in place at the right time. The structure had to be built. We had to get AFT on board. That was a major fight. Nobody had ever done this in Texas. And, the prevailing wisdom was -- and the state organization was saying, that we should not do it because if we did it, it would give the idea to the Texas State Teachers Association, and then they would run around the state getting these elections up, and we would be defeated everywhere.

So, all of that was kind of working. We started the process of educating teachers with a survey about, "Rate your contract." And, it was just two pages -- 8 1/2x14

front and back -- of areas they should write their contract: acceptable, unacceptable, on a five point scale or something.

Q: Did teachers have individual contracts?

A: Yeah, that was the thing. It was as one page document mimeographed or copied, not even signed but stamped from the administration building that listed the reasons they could be fired, which were numerous.

Q: And that was their contract?

A: Well, it also had a statement in there about, "They could be assigned to any duties including duties other than those that are contemplated at this moment, and at a salary to be determined by the school board for a length of time to the department by the school board," and a final covering thing that says, "And in any case, the school board deserves the right to terminate employment for reasons," -- something like -- "unforeseen exigencies." So, nobody read their blasted contract. Nobody knew they had one. The idea of the survey was to get somebody to go get one and read it. So, we have to get our building reps to say, "Be sure you bring the copy of your contract." People would say, "What's this stupid thing? We don't have a contract." Well, here's mine. Let's look at mine. The specificity about duties: acceptable, five, unacceptable, one. So, people will go, "What does that mean? It doesn't say any duties in here." They could have assigned me to sweep floors, and somebody would likely say, "They not only can, they did. I had to…."

So, that was the first step. Then, we had hearings. Then we announced

the results, "You say your contract sucks." And then we had hearings about, "Come tell us what you'd like to have in the contract." Then, we put together some sample contract language from AFT documents. AFT contracts we picked up -- scrounged, which is a surprisingly difficult thing to do. I sent letters all over the US. "Send us a copy of your contract.

We printed surveys with language form AFT contracts in place in other cities, asking, "Which of these would you prefer? Your current contract? or, language from Cincinnati, OH...", "Language from New York City...?", and they would check which ones they thought were best.

Then, we had committees from different groups meet to prepare contract language and what they'd like to see us negotiate. We did something that is absolutely wrong. It's heresy, but it served a purpose. We had a ratification meeting before we even had the election. We had them vote to ratify the contract that they would get if we won the election. We had hearings all over the city, and then we had a big meeting when they came. At the same time that's going on, using the air conditioning issue mainly, I was hitting every Kiwanis club, Lion's Club, Rotary Club, you name it. I was at 7 o'clock in the morning here and there. I spoke to the yacht club. That was fun.

Q: I bet that was great (laughter).

A: A reporter who attended came up afterwards and said, "The guy sitting next to me said, "Sounds like Chairman Mao to me." (laughter) Talking ostensibly about air conditioning, and it was a legitimate thing to talk about -- air

conditioning in public schools -- but also getting out there the idea, "This is the union president having lunch, having breakfast with us." These are not people who are top-line leaders in the community. But they're important figures in some world, the insurance world, or something. And then, politically, there had been, believe it or not, a lot of hostility between teachers and Hispanic leaders, primarily brought on by Hispanic leaders viewing teachers as a part of the education world that had given them the shaft, and trying to give their children the shaft -- and from the teachers' point of view, feeling like all these guys do is criticize us, and here we are trying to do our best. Nobody was talking to each other.

Now, Corpus Christi happened to be the home and the birthplace of two -- at that time -- of the most widely accepted Hispanic advocacy organizations: the American GI Forum, which was started by Dr. Hector Garcia, a much-revered figure down there. He started it after World War II when he and other veterans came back from World War II to find that they were not allowed to be buried in the white cemeteries, and he used that issue to build a pretty effective organization. The other one, which was the older organizations, the League of United Latin American Citizens, Corpus Christi's the home of Council Number One, which was the first one of those. GI Forum was very blue collar, LULAC was small business owners and professional people. Anyway, I went to the president of LULAC -- at that time Ruben Bonilla -- went to his house, have a meeting with him and I said, "Here's my perspective. When it comes to elected

officials, you don't care much about their opinion on education. You do care if they're brown. I don't care what color they are, but I do care about their ideas on education. It seems to me we have a natural coalition. That was the start of a very productive and long-lasting friendship. I appointed from my executive board one person whose job it was to go to every LULAC meeting, and one to go to every GI Forum meeting. Then, we also reached out to the black community. There weren't that many black teachers, but we always had at least one on the board. And, then I identified this wonderful man, Reverend Elliot Grant, who became a father figure to me. And, in '78, we put together this coalition, and we ran two Hispanics, and Reverend Elliot Grant, who was African American. There was a fluke that year. Three spots were up. Normally they did it so that no more than two ever came up on a school board at any time. But, three came up that year. Reverend Grant blew away his opponent -- wasn't close. Clemente Garcia, I want to say he won but it was pretty close. And then Dr. Arturo Medina won by, like, 40 votes. And, we had shown them copies of teacher contracts and we said, "This is what we want. If we support you, we wanted an election. If we lose, we lose, but this is what we're going to try to negotiate."

So, that track was going on. Of course, we were trying to recruit members constantly. We still had difficulty getting on the school grounds. Sometimes the principals tended to be sympathetic with us, because what we were talking about were things they cared about too. They saw the same things happening we did. So, some schools we could get onto. We could talk to people before school and

after school, and sometimes even during lunch and in the planning period. Other schools, we couldn't.

Q: Did teachers have planning periods?

A: Yes. Yes, they did. And, they had lunch periods. The lunch periods, though, were because of our work in the Classroom Teachers Association. So were the planning periods. The year before all of this blew up -- I forgot about that -- we negotiated from the administration a 20 minute duty-free lunch.

But we did a lot of home visits. Now, Corpus Christi, we were lucky in that we were in Corpus Christi. I've since learned Houston is a different world, and Dallas is a different world. First of all in Houston or Dallas, you can drive 30-40 miles to get from one place to another on those freeways. In Corpus Christi, it was pretty compact, and teachers tended to live in a couple of areas in some apartment complexes where you could go and just spend all day Saturday there knocking on doors. After school, we put together home visit teams; we learned early on that we had to go in teams with at least one woman. I had an incident where I went by myself to visit this female teacher, and there in her house -- we were pretty famous for these flipbooks. These were, like, things that you could flip over from one page to the other, and they would tell a story so that if we got somebody to agree to go do home visits with us, that person, we didn't have to do a lot of training. You'd just hand them this book and say, "Flip the pages." Anytime they say they want to join, stop right there and take the card. But, the last page dealt with, if nothing else, ask him to join. So, I'm going through my

flipbook, and two guys come in, open the front door, turn around, and close it deliberately behind them. I'm guessing one of these is her husband. So I'm starting to think of strategies for getting out of what could be an embarrassing situation, not to mention perhaps painful. These guys, one of them turns to me and he says, "I've got something to say to you."

The other guy turns and turns the lights off, and then flips on a projector, and starts an Amway slideshow. (laughter) I damn near bought just out of gratitude for not being beaten up. After that, we said, "Look, you have to go in teams," and two men is threatening to a lot of women, so one of them has to be a woman." So, we did that. We did a lot of home visits. I like to say we built that local on home visits. Since we didn't have a school mail privilege, we delivered all our literature to the building representatives' homes from the first. Linda Bridges took the the west side of town, I took the south side. We drove around to our building reps' houses at night every night after we printed the newsletter. We'd get through printing it about 9 or 10 o'clock. Then, we'd drive around and deliver it. At one time, we knew where most of our members lived, and where all of our building reps lived. We had very close touch with the grass roots.

The game plan that we laid out had everything coming together in '79. We'd won the election in May of '78 for the school board. Then we started the process, and the school administration's first take on things was, "All right, we can't deny they've won the school board election. We have to give them some

sort of vehicle for dealing with the school administration -- several official vehicles." So, they set up joint consultation, where both groups would come in and meet with the administration. I have to say, throughout most of this, we were helped immensely by the ineptitude and incompetence of the NEA and TSTA. We knew they would be stupid, and we played on it all the time. When the administration announced that that was going to be the case, I held a press conference and I said, "This will not work. But, it will not be our fault that it won't work. We're going to do everything that must be done to make it work." (The other side, the NEA group, have not only not endorsed any candidates, not only not endorsed the winners, they had announced that none of the candidates running were worthwhile.) And I said, "In that spirit, we're now inviting our rival organization to join with us. We will meet with them, and jointly put together our proposals to take to the administration." And, of course, they denounced us, "Dirty unionists... We'll never be in the same room with them," yada, yada, yada. That scenario played out over and over again. One morning I woke up. The alarm radio went off, and the first thing I hear, the announcer saying, "Well, John Cole offered an olive branch to the Teachers Association, and they threw it back in his face today."

So, we, then, played the game straight. We put together proposals. We had committees. We had a team that went and made the proposals, and made the administration meet with both groups separately, and then the whole thing, of course, was pretty predictable. Nothing ever got done. The other side, if we asked for $1,000 pay raise, immediately demanded $2,000. The whole process

was shambles within three months. Meanwhile, again, we had our brothers and sisters helping us just deluge all the policy makers in Corpus Christi with letters. We had committees writing them, and the local newspaper came out saying, "You know, giving these teachers an election seems reasonable to us. What's wrong with that?" The election was held in May of 1979. Now, AFT, of course, it was difficult to get them to buy into the fact that we were going to do this.

Q: AFT national or the TFT?

A: Well, both. We still had the president of TFT who was threatened by us. AFT kept saying that the TFT is opposed to this, and they say it's going to be bad. We shouldn't do it. But, once we got the election -- well, I had a conversation with Gene Didier that went something like this. He was saying all the reasons why we can't do it, and it's bad, and I said, "Gene, I thought the whole idea of this was for us to get an election. We can beat those bastards." And he said, "You know, I can't argue with that." After the school board voted and set a date for the election, AFT came in most generously with tons of help. We were, of course, over-matched in terms of staff versus the NEA poured in --

END OF AUDIO FILE 2

I don't know how much. Typical AFT-NEA battle: AFT was out-gunned at least two to one, and probably more. We had 750 members. The association had at that time about 1,400 or so they claimed. But, we had done voter assessments, and we knew that the majority of their members were likely to vote for us. I was surprised at how effective the NEA campaign was. That was my first experience with how effective playing on

people's fear and prejudice can be in an election. But, in the end, we beat them 1,079 to 898, which means we pulled over 250 of their members.

That first year, we didn't do much. We won in May. The contract, or the budget, had to be set in August. We won some minor gains. But, as soon as we signed that deal, which wasn't anything to remark on, I called my executive board together and said, "We're going to take a strike vote in May of 1980. It'll be at a meeting where we're going to have at least 1,000, and hopefully 2,000, teachers present in one room. And, we're going to work from now until that day to get that done." There's never been a teacher strike in Corpus Christi. And, in truth, I did not plan on having a strike.

Q: No, of course not.

A: But, we worked. We worked hard all that year. We had committees of all sorts, committees leading up to the thing to get organized so that on the night that it occurred we had people with flashlights, working to get people parking places. We had people assigned to doors to hand out material. We had people assigned to microphones to speak. We had everything - had Nat LaCour come in from New Orleans. Now, in those days, inflation was running in double digits. The numbers sound unbelievable today. But, we had put on the table a request for a 20% pay raise. Now, I told the executive board, we aren't going to get 20%. We're going to get 15%. When we get to 15%, we settle. But, we're asking for 20%. The administration was offering 5%, which didn't bother us. We had the meeting. And, sure enough, I don't know how many we got. I've got a picture of that meeting somewhere, but I don't see it here. But, it was packed. 1,500 maybe out

of the 2,100 teachers of Corpus Christi were there. And, we had it all orchestrated so that, first, our bargaining team guy got up and expressed his frustration. "They won't even listen to us. They laugh at us." Now, LaCour gave a barnburner of a stump speech. He sat down and said, "You got your strike vote." (laughter) And then we had planned on Cora Beth Johnson, who's this Little Miss Dove, if you ever read that short story. This is Cora Beth, hair back in a bun, Miss Teacher to get up and say, "I've been teaching for 30 years, and I would never have dreamed I would do this, but I move that if they don't give us what we ask for, we go on strike," and that whole place is erupting with applause. Then I had arranged for someone to second it, and after I let some people speak, then I gave this nice, conciliatory speech in which I said, "Give me one more chance to go back and let the administration have another chance. I think it behooves us all to give them one more shot." So, that passed, and then the next day, we went to the table. They increased their offer to 15%. (laughter) And then, I went to the executive board and they said, "No, we're not settling for 15%." (laughter) So, I got mad at that point, and I had them take faculty rosters. I told them, this cannot appear in public, because what we're doing is illegal. We are in a conspiracy to violate the law here.

Your goal: get all our building reps are to get every person in the building to sign their initials next to one of these three columns, "I accept the board's offer of 15%." "I reject the board's offer of 15%, and I will vote to strike and support the strike." "I reject the board's offer. I will not vote to strike, but I will support

the strike." Those were the three columns. You can't have anything else. They took them around, and it came back like a politician's nightmare. It was like 55-45. But, the dynamics were such that the administration only heard from their stooges. What their stooges saw were all these initials next to, "I will vote to strike," column. So, then we went in the next day to the administration, and they went from 15% to 15.5%. That gave me enough that I went to the board and said, "If you don't accept this, you've got to get a new president because I quit." So, we got 15.5% that year. The three years that I was president before Linda Bridges took over, we got 17.5% pay raises without a strike.

Q: That was huge, then.

A: Oh yeah. Well, in those days, inflation was running 10-11%. We made a lot of gains. I mean we made a lot of progress.

END OF AUDIO FILE 3

A: Well, the TFT was --

Q: What was it like before 1980?

A: We had a number of small locals. There were Houston and Corpus that each had 1,000 members or more. Corpus Christi was the biggest at that time. El Paso had about 500 members, and Laredo had about 500 members. Dallas, because of some political things that went on prior -- it's a long story. Harley Hiscox had been banished to Dallas, and the deal was that he was getting a very small grant to organize Dallas, with the understanding he would not pay dues to

the state federation, in part so that they could use that money to organize, but also in part because the national organizing director wanted Harley out of the state political scene. Harley had just led a coup to get rid of the president of TFT, even though he was working as her assistant at the time he started it. And, the guy that won turned out to be a really inadequate president.

Q: That was Wilcox?

A: Yes. Anyway, we had locals with 10-20 members. They could not represent their members in any meaningful way. They didn't have enough mass to be able to put together the resources to even put out newsletters or do basic things. Frequently, they were people who had organized into a group for reasons that were not in keeping with AFT's goal and mission. But, there were many others over in the Beaumont -- most call it the Golden Triangle of Texas, the Beaumont/Port Arthur area. That were organized because they viewed the NEA as too liberal. And, by this time, NEA had unified with TSTA. There were dissident groups within the TSTA -- well, not dissident within the TSTA. They were dissident at being forced to join the NEA, which they viewed as a liberal organization. So they formed an AFT local. Then, you had groups that were formed under the illusion that if you call yourself a union, that that of itself conferred upon you some power, prestige, or influence you would not ordinarily have. For example, in San Antonio, where there are a number of school districts, we had the North East Federation of Teachers, the Northside Federation of Teachers, East Central Federation of Teachers, South Side Federation of Teachers, South San Antonio Federation of Teachers, Harlandale Federation of

Teachers, Edgewood Federation of Teachers, and the San Antonio Federation of Teachers. Collectively, they might have had 300 members.

We had a local in Odessa that should never have received a charter -- made up entirely of bus drivers, no capacity to pay enough dues -- 39 of them or something. We had a local in Port Arthur. We had had a teacher local there, and then they got diverted onto what always seems to be an easy, attractive path of recruiting classified employees who will join more readily than teachers usually. But, once the word got out that the classified employees dominated, and they elected a classified employees President, the teachers began to drop and soon we had another classified only organization that was unable to support any activity. Meanwhile, the state federation had a president, two organizers and two secretaries for a total of five people -- most of which was financed by an AFT grant. Let me rethink that. Dick Arnold, Debra Brickens, two organizers, a president, two secretaries. There was no newsletter for the state federation. There was no legislative program. Each year, there would be some bill to mandate a duty free lunch for teachers, and that would be the legislative program.

Since there was no lobbyist, our presence in the capital was not even up to the smoke and mirrors level. When we campaigned in Corpus Christi, we said over and over again, "Yeah, but you don't live in Austin." The TFT was a liability to organizing efforts. Meanwhile, in Corpus Christi, I had just married, and was blissfully happy. We'd won the election, accomplished everything I had set out to

do, and I had begun making arrangements to return to teaching, which, thanks to the work we'd done politically, I was able to line up. The superintendent wouldn't have liked it, but he didn't have the votes to keep me away anymore. In fact, he didn't have the votes on the board that we did at that time. So...

Q: Could we back up just a second? How is it that Corpus was able to get a pseudo-collective bargaining agreement, where the rest of Texas couldn't?

A: We didn't get a collective bargaining agreement. We did get a contract with the district. There are two answers to your question. One is legalistic, and one is, in terms of practical -- historical accomplishments, I guess -- legally what we did is we lumped together all the board policies that dealt with employee matters. And then, we had the school board sign an agreement saying they would not change any of those policies for a period of two years except through consultation with the Corpus Christi AFT. And then, there wasa catchall clause that said, "Nor any change in salaries, working conditions, or wages" to keep them from adding a whole new section... They said, "Board policies 4,100 through 4,199 will not be changed from the period of 1979-1981 except through consultation with the Corpus Christi AFT." Then, we had a procedure where a mutual agreement we could change things. And, in emergencies, we had a clause where either the administration or the union could take something to the school board if we couldn't agree, and felt there was a need to change the policy. And then, the board could decide what they wanted to do about it. So, that's the legalistic answer. The case was never tested in court. Our argument would have been that it wasn't collective bargaining, and that school boards have the right to

hire consultants. They have the right to give consultants contracts, including the exclusive right to be the only consultant on a given thing, efficiency, air conditioning experts; they'd hire consultants to consult with them on their health insurance or their liability insurance. So, we were the consultant on employee-related matters.

And, I think that argument would prevail. I think their attorney thought it would prevail because after I left, when Linda Bridges first took over, a new superintendent came in. We had gotten rid of the old one, and the new guy tried to get the board to repeal that policy, and the attorney told him, "You can't change it until 1981."

So, now, in terms of practical fact, it was a combination of people who understood what the mission was, who were in it for the right reasons, and were willing to work incredibly hard to make it happen. Examples: Linda Bridges' mother had a stroke, went into the hospital, and died eventually. She was there in the waiting room all day. She came by the union office, picked up a box of newsletters that we prepared, took them to the waiting room to fold to keep herself occupied, and then people there sort of saying, "I'm bored. Give me some of those." (laughter) Now, I worked everyday, including Christmas, for a little bit from 1975-1981 when I left the union. Now, on Christmas Day, it wasn't a lot maybe -- fold a few fliers while I was watching a football game or something. But everyday we worked. You know, we did other things that other people would

not want to do, did not want to do. We got in our cars in the summer in Corpus Christi, and drove from house to house. Not just me. We had four teams, five teams out sometimes a night. We were focused on it. We had a plan, and we had a calendar. That plan was folly. You can't always follow your calendar slavishly, but by and large, we didn't let ourselves say, "Gee, well, let's just blow this off."

We had the benefit of a lot of people breaking ground before us, the whole idea of how to get the agreement came from, I think, Albuquerque, where in those days collective bargaining was not yet legal. I told you, I wrote around asking for contracts. Well, here comes this one, and it's not a contract. It says board policy this and this can be changed. And, it's like, "Bing," a flashlight goes off. I didn't think of this myself. Somebody else thought of it. And I did formula time. In those days, they made you do 20 days a year. And, in Cincinnati, I impressed Mercedes Hill who was an AFT national rep. And, she asked for me everywhere she went thereafter. I wound up in Florida and Brevard when we won that election. I wound up in Baltimore when we won that one, not for Loretta to get to paras, but for the teachers.

And, Linda Bridges went to Atlanta at least. I can't remember all of them – Albuquerque, too, I think. We were constantly asking people, talking to people, picking up ideas and learning. But, we had a group of people who were just committed to the right thing. I'm sure there were some people who joined the union because they considered our superintendent to be a jerk. Personally I liked

the guy, even though he was the embodiment of everything that education did wrong. The policies he put in place were like a litany of catastrophic policies that led to the virtual -- almost -- destruction of public education in this country. He was a nice guy, though: pleasant, charming -- and since then, trying to explain this to groups that I go out and talk to, over the years I would hear them say, "You know, the superintendent's a jerk. We've got to get rid of this guy." And I would say, "Your problem isn't that your superintendent's a jerk. He may be. I don't know. Your problem is that you have a system where the superintendent has such influence over your lives and the lives of these students." And, I would say, looking back on history, "King George III was a reasonably pleasant, unobjectionable king. It wasn't George III that was the problem. It was the fact that Americans decided they would no longer live under a monarchy." That's what you have to understand about the union movement. It isn't the superintendent that's the problem. It's the system that's the problem.

So, I was blessed with people that got that picture pretty early on, and we preached that message over and over again that people would -- by the way, one of the things that I observed in 24 years of organizing in Texas is that one of the quickest ways to destroy a union is they pick up on the fact that if you win a school board election you can get the superintendent fired. Then, after that's done, I said, "Wow, that problem's taken care of." Then you look up, and there's no union left. Then, a few years later you get a phone call saying, "

What do we have to do to get the union started here -- and we used to have a union around here." So, we had that.

There was also a confluence of forces. Hispanic activism was on the rise in south Texas. We capitalized on that tremendously at a time when the majority of teachers were Anglos. We looked at the student population, though, and we looked at the population, and we said, "The future in this city is with people who have brown skin," and those people were looking for a piece of the action at the same time we were. We were able to put together a coalition. That was significant. A lot of our groups never get that picture. Teachers cannot do this thing by themselves. That's where organized labor should be so important and can be so important. That's why it's such a catastrophe for all of us that labor's falling apart in this moment.

Q: Because they're losing a lot of their voice.

A: We're losing our base. The teachers are a tiny, tiny percentage of any community. The parents, the taxpayers, those people used to be the working people that belonged to the unions. They supported the public schools. I mean, who would have ever thought that we would see an attack on the institution of public education on the scale that we've seen in this country? Well, it would not have happened if we'd maintained a strong, vigorous labor movement in this country. In those days, Corpus Christi, by Texas standards, had one of those stronger, more vigorous labor movements. We had 10,000 union members in the Coastal Bend Labor Council. The largest union was the Steelworkers. Today

there's not a Steelworker member left. There are no steel plants left. OCAW was a big one: Oil, Chemical & Atomic Workers. I don't know that there are any OCAW members down there anymore. There are damn few in Texas. It used to be one of the biggest unions in the state. To a certain extent, labors declined is not its own fault. Steelworkers did nothing to bring on the catastrophe of the '80s, nor did the oil workers. But nevertheless, the unions that are left are disproportionately service area workers and public workers, which doesn't bode well for the future of the labor movement. The two biggest unions in Texas now are CWA, and AFT.

Q: CWA?

A: Telephone.

Q: They have the telephone out here?

A: Sprint, Bell South --

Q: Oh that's right; Bell South's still around.

A: Some public workers -- although they've spent a huge amount of money to get precious little...

Q: Yeah. SEIU is trying to move into Houston.

A: So they say. It's hard to know what SEIU really is doing. SEIU in Texas has been its worst incarnation because the local that SEIU gave jurisdiction is local 100, which began life as an ACORN group, not a local group, and chose to try to get the members by raiding other labor unions including us. And, when you say you're trying to organize in Houston, what they're trying to do is raid AFSMCE.

Q: Yeah. Well, that's going on across the country.

A: And, AFSMCE was in trouble there anyway. I was just looking up -- in 2002 it's the last time I checked. SEIU had 1,569 members in Texas.

Anyway, I was in Corpus Christi preparing to leave my union career behind and become a teacher again when I received an unusual visit from Richard Shaw, who was then President of the Houston Federation of Teachers, and Harley Hiscox, who was the President of the Dallas Federation of Teachers, and who hated one another. And, they both came to Corpus Christi to ask me to move aside the person that was president of the TFT and become the president. I knew the state federation was in bad shape, but this was clearly a sign that things were terrible, although neither Richard nor Harley nor I had any idea how bad.

After discussing it, we did, we managed a coup with AFT's assistance. They were crucial because they had to provide him with a golden parachute, which was a full time position as president of the Austin Federation of Teachers. In January, 1981, he stepped down, and I was appointed president by the executive council. Within two weeks, I discovered that although publicly we were claiming 15,000 members, we had about 3,500 paying per capita. That didn't surprise me so much. I also discovered the bookkeeper had been embezzling on a big scale, such that only about $1 out of ever $10 collected made it into the TFT's accounts. The next three or four months were -- well, the next year was awful. Obviously, I fired the bookkeeper, and funny, prior to my taking

over as president, some months prior, there had been a fire at the TFT office. It turned out that she had set that fire because she thought someone was on her trail, and might catch her, and she wanted to cover up her tracks. So, she had burned all the records, and all the machinery.

So, the TFT had a two-room office on top of a male strip joint in downtown Austin, and that was about it. It had this desk -- same desk -- and telephone, I guess a receptionist's desk. But we acquired some nice furniture because I got a call from this penthouse manager who said we were behind in payments on our penthouse. I said, "We don't have a penthouse." And he said, "Sure you do: Texas Federation of Teachers contact person Jolie Chandler" She was the bookkeeper. I said, "Well, this is bad news for you, but you're not going to get any future payments." And he said, "Well, what are you going to do with all your furniture?" I said, "We're going to come get it." So, for a while my office had this couch that looked like it came out of New Orleans cathouse: white with silver bangles flecked all through it, fluffy, and a matching chair. The National Secretary Treasurer of AFT, Bob Porter, had noticed that my predecessor had let the fire insurance lapse. When the fire occurred, we had no insurance. But, the AFT's secretary treasurer noticed that we had let also the bond lapse. And, in those days, AFT officials were required to be bonded for $5,000. So, he had on his own initiative had AFT pay – (this was back before I was president) to get us covered. This was important because the check for $5,000 came, and I was sitting in my desk opening my mail, and these two guys come in and flash badges, and

say, "We're with the IRS. You owe us $17,000 and counting." What had happened -- of course, the bookkeeper had collected the money from FICA but had not passed it on. I said, "Well, would $5,000 as a starting point satisfy you for right now?" And they said, "Yes." So, I flipped that check open, signed it, and handed it to them and said, "There you go."

Later, the fees and interest were much more than the original amount that we owed, and one of the first things I did -- and it was a tough political fight was to get my wife, Sharon, hired to be the bookkeeper for TFT. I had to have somebody I could trust and rely upon. And, she went to the IRS, and when they started describing all that we owed, she started crying. Before she got out of there, they agreed to settle for just the back deposits. My predecessor also had bought a fleet of cars, and had gotten written into the staff contract -- if the staff got it, he would get it -- that they were guaranteed a TFT car. They had a contract clause that said that they got the car, and we paid car insurance. And, they had a credit card, and they could charge gasoline even if it was just driving around town. And they got holidays -- any holiday that was an Austin Independent School District holiday, any state holiday, and any national holiday. So, the first time I met with the staff union, I said, "Let's list the days you want to work. It'll be a shorter list." And, we had to go through this horrible thing. We literally could not meet contractual obligations. We had to say, "Look, I'm sorry. We either start laying people off, or we take things away." So, all of us went without retirement. We kept the retirement plan in place, and the people could pay into it

with the union contributing nothing. And, the same thing with health insurance. We kept the health insurance plan, but people had to pay their own costs. We cut everybody's salary significantly, took away the cars -- Sharon sold them through the want ads. So, we had a really horrible first year dealing with that. Then, there were the political problems. Dallas wasn't paying any per capita.

Now one of the things I did do, since I was in a pretty strong position with -- vis-à-vis AFT -- they wanted that guy out and wanted me to take the job and I insisted that we would hire a lobbyist. And, this was very difficult for Phil Kugler to accept, because Phil's belief was that any assistance money went into recruitment activities only. But, since I was in a pretty strong position, I said, "Well, this is how it is. It's either this way or I won't take the job." And, I hired not my immediate predecessor, but June Karp, who had been president before him, who politically she had been pretty hostile. She and I had been at each others' throats, but she was well liked in Dallas -- or, not in Dallas. Dallas hated her. She was well liked in Houston. And also, she needed a job. And, she was known in Austin. She was well known in the capital. She became our first lobbyist.

Because among other things, if you're going to recruit members, it's truly said that hope makes an adequate breakfast but a very bad supper. You have to be able at the end of the day show something. In January '81, that was a legislative year. So, one of the first things I did was sit down with the education code and write a school finance bill. I never had done that before. But, I just read the school

finance provisions, figured out how the formulas worked, and I wrote one that frankly had been passed, would have put Texas years ahead of where we wound up on equalization of funding because the school finance was just a catastrophe in those days. Literally, the state gave more money to wealthy districts than they did poor districts because of the way they had worded the formulas. It was a conspiracy.

So I wrote one, and then I got a guy, a Corpus Christi legislator to introduce it so that we would have a legislative program that featured a significant pay raise, more money for needy students who disproportion ally who reside in Hispanic and black areas helping us build our coalition there, and built an advocacy campaign around, "Let's pass this bill," which it did not. It never made it out of committee. But, we had a good a committee hearing.

Q: I bet. But you made your presence.

A: Right. We began to make it known that the Texas Federation of Teachers was going to be an organization of substance in the capital. Then we started an organizing program where I and some other people identified initially six things that a local had to do to survive in Texas. And, we call this the six-point program. I told the organizers, "This is what you are to get locals doing." I told locals, "If you want help, this is what you will get help doing." The six things were recruitment, finances – dues collection and budgeting -- advocacy, grievance representation, publications, regular publications, needs assessment -- those six things. So, if a local called and said, "We need some staff help." It needs to be

from one of those six things. And, not immediately -- because it took me a while to get a little bit of a grasp on this. But within the first year, at the end of the first year, thereabouts, I put a moratorium on any new charters -- no new charter applications to cross my desk because we didn't need any more ten-member locals located 500 miles from this office, made up of ten people who hated their superintendent. Instead, we started an organizing committee program aimed at getting organizing committees that could get those six things done as one condition for applying for a charter. There were others. Later, we expanded that list of six to 12, and then to 13. The six are still there for survival, but if you want to be successful, there's an additional six. And, an additional one got added on later, too.

But, the six-point program became for the next ten years the goal.

Now, we had some very fortunate things occur. In 1982, a real Democrat got elected governor of Texas, and it was the last time there was a Democratic sweep of the state offices. And we, for our part, didn't guess right initially on the governor. We endorsed his opponent in the primaries. We made up for it, though, later on. We did guess right on a couple of key people, and found ourselves in a position disproportionate to our size to have some impact. The biggest piece of luck was that particular governor who had run heavily on -- Mark White was his name -- a campaign of improving education in Texas, couldn't get his program through the legislature. The Democrats were predominant, but in

those days, Texas Democrats were not real Democrats. So he appointed a special committee headed by H. Ross Perot to investigate Texas public education, and put together recommendations for top to bottom restructuring and reform of education in Texas. This became extremely important for us because most of the education community rallied around the idea of no outsider like Ross Perot should be dabbling in our business.

Q: "He's just some business billionaire."

A: Right. We took a different tack, and instead prepared a package of proposals to take to him. In 1983, I was at the convention in Los Angeles when I got a call from the office that said, "Can you come home early? H. Ross Perot wants to meet with you." So, as it turned out, he put together this-- he spent a lot of his own money. They said $1 million, which was a lot of money back then in '83. They hired consultants, hired staff, did some things in the way of lobbying that people should have learned from in our business, but don't seem to have -- anyway, we met with their consultants. We laid out our ideas, and when his report came out from his special committee, the teacher portion of it looked like we wrote it. Our hands were all over it. We did not go in and say, "You need to just increase teacher salaries," for example. We said, "There is a need for teacher pay increase, but more importantly you need to reward people who are good at teaching, and you need to make it financially worthwhile to stay in teaching as opposed to moving into coaching or into administration or into some other profession." And so, we recommended a career ladder, which they bought into.

He came out with a controversial recommendation that all Texas teachers should take a test to keep their certificate. And then, future teachers should pass a test to get a certificate. This was a real tough one, but we had our executive council in. We had a big debate, and in the end voted to support the package, including the teacher test. I said, "I think we should support this." We had a close vote, but I got a majority, and we were the only one of the education organizations except for the Elementary Principals Organization in the end that supported the legislation that came out of this.

Q: NEA and the two other independents --

A: They opposed it. So did the superintendents. So did the school boards. So did the secondary principals.

Q: Is it because there was some sort of accountability going here?

A: Various things... There was something in there for everybody to hate. There was a statewide curriculum. School boards hated that. Remember my story earlier about the 11-cent tax rate, and how you can't do that if you have to really offer, like, Algebra? Superintendents hated the career ladder as much as people thought teachers would because in writing legislation, we tried to get the legislators to nail down specific things, and put an appeals process there so that you couldn't just say, "OK, we like Mary better than Jane." You had to show why Mary was better than Jane, and based off of classroom observations, that included two visits by the principal each year, and two visits by someone from off that campus who was an expert in that field. There were some other requirements like extra education and minimal years of experience, like three years, before you

could begin moving up. And, it couldn't be based off anything having to do with extracurricular activities: no coaching. You couldn't give all the coaches the career ladder money. So, the superintendents hated it. The coaches hated the legislation because it had in it a rule that students had to make a 70 in every class in order to participate in extracurricular activities.

Q: Pass or Play

A: Yeah. And, the secondary principals were disproportionately made up of ex-coaches. This was their big issue. The elementary principals stayed with it even though they hated a lot of these things too. But, it had a class size cap of 22 pupils for pre-kindergarten through fourth grade: not an average but a cap.

Q: Wow.

A: Indeed. It established for the first time a requirement that school districts offer kindergarten to four year olds who were limited English proficient. If they had 20 of them, I believe, in their district, they had to have a program. They had to have a kindergarten program in every district. It didn't require parents to send their children --

Q: But it was offered.

A: But it has to be offered. It's still there. By the way, the RAND Corporation, in naming a few years ago Texas as tied with, I think, North Dakota or South Dakota as the best in the nation in teaching reading and math, cited those two factors as their idea of the cause: universal kindergarten access, and the small class sizes. Before that law passed, it was an inverted pyramid. The biggest classes were in kindergarten. The second biggest were in first grade. And the

smallest classes were senior high school classes, which arguably is the worst way to do it, because if you're going to invest your money, the best place to sink it is pre-kindergarten. By the time they get to high school, if they've gotten the basics in kindergarten and pre-kindergarten, you don't have to worry about them. If they haven't gotten the basics, you can forget about them.

This turned all that on its head. Teachers, of course, were expected to hate it, and did, by and large, because of the clause that they take a test to keep their certificate. If you look on my certificate, there's a sticker. See it? TECAT: Texas Educator -- that means I passed the test. This legislation passed in 1984.

Q: What did the TFT hate about it?

A: I'm sorry?

Q: What did the TFT hate about this legislation? It seemed like the --

A: Well, we didn't like the test either. Our members hated it. I could make a very good case that it was a stupid thing to do. But, here's the speech that I gave over and over again. I would go to a meeting, and the teachers would say, "You can't tell me that just because I pass a test, that means I can teach." And I would say, "You're 100% right, and you can't tell me that if you cannot pass that test, that you can teach."

You have to have knowledge of something. How can you teach what you don't know? Anyway, there was, in this bill, in addition to everything, a 40% increase in pay across the board. The salary schedule was cut from taking 40 years to get

to the top down to 11. There was, at that time, the biggest tax bill in the history of the nation to pay for the biggest increase in education expenditures in the history of the nation. Oh, they eliminated the state board of education. Officially, we hated that. Unofficially, we were delighted. The state board of education was a disaster. It was exactly what it is today, a bunch of nuts -- mainly religious nuts -- who had gotten elected because nobody paid any attention to that race, and who were using their position to strike evolution out of the biology textbooks, do things like go through and order that pictures of women carrying briefcases be taken out of textbooks because women's place was in the home. Now, we were caught in a tough spot. We had to work with a bureaucracy over there. So, officially, we said we didn't like that. But, privately, we all thought it was great. In fact, the governor appointed a state board of education that was the best we have ever had before or since -- wonderful people to work with. They hired the best commissioner of education we've had before or since. He was a wonderful man, took hard decisions, didn't mind standing up in front of a group whether it was friends like us or his worst enemies. He'd look and tell you what he thought, and tell you when he thought you were crazy, and tell you when he thought you were right. Unfortunately, it was a political issue that was capable of exploitation, democracy and all that. There was a provision in the law that said that after a period of time, the state board of education would become an elected body again.

When that occurred, the quality of the board began to sink immediately. And today, we're back right where we were, at the point where Ross Perot said of

that board; in those days it reminded him of the Louisiana legislature in the 1930s. I think we're back to that point.

By '84, we had grown to where we had about 6,000 actual members. They were tough times. Harley Hiscox tried to get his group to disaffiliate, and had taken about half of them with him so that of the 500 members they allegedly had, he cost us about 250. I had seen that coming. It was telegraphed.

(phone rings)

I'm trying to think.

Q: TFT has now 6,000 members. You just got the education reform tests. Hiscox was doing his usual thing.

A: Yeah. Well, Harley has his side of the story too. AFT didn't behave in a totally honorable fashion with him. What happened is Chuck Richards had been director of organizing. He was friends with Harley, and he made that deal about not paying per capita. I was present when, several times, Harley said in Chuck Richards' presence, "You know, we're not paying per capita," and Chuck didn't say, "You have to do that. You must do that." I know they had that agreement. But then, when Chuck got the axe, and Phil moved in, Bob Porter hated Harley with a passion, and Phil had clearly a mandate to punish Harley, and did. Harley retaliated by starting a separate organization, just what we need in the state, which I had seen coming. This story being what it is, Harley had been married to a woman named Maureen Peters, who had gone with him to Dallas, and had been the secretary treasurer of the local -- he was the president, that being because they

were the first two members. But, Harley had divorced Maureen and married a much younger woman who is president now in Dallas, Amy Bolender. Not wanting to have his ex-wife around, he had fired her. So, Maureen was unemployed when I became president, and we absolutely did not have the money to do it. But, I hired her to be a TFT organizer and assigned her to Ft. Worth, which was a waste of her talent. Ft. Worth is an imminently organizable place, but our local there was the pits. The real reason I hired her was when Harley left, I wanted somebody to be able to move into that situation who knew everybody, and who could help us save the situation.

So, she did. And, she held 250 members in. Harley started the United Teachers of Dallas, and we then had the rivalry for some period of time there. Eventually, things got to a situation where we were able to merge those two groups back together. Harley, Amy, and Maureen worked it all out among themselves, and made it all work, which is something of an accomplishment. In fact, Amy and Maureen, I think, are very close friends. We went through a very tough period of time for some years. But in the long run, we pulled things together, and it's now TFT's flagship local with 7,000+ members.

Meanwhile, during the aftermath of the House bill 72 experience, we had an embarrassment of riches. We had more opportunities to start locals in organizing committees in the state than we could comply with. Thinking back, we threw out thousands of cards that people had returned to us, saying they were interested in

starting a local, or joining -- we could not get to them, just didn't have the troops to do it. I don't know how many thousand members we lost, or were unable to get in that fashion. We were the only organization speaking to the governor, lieutenant governor, and speaker. They ostentatiously threw the other education organizations out of their office, a moment of personal satisfaction.

During the time the legislation was being debated, I was in the Capitol. An aide for the governor came running up to me and said, "The governor wants to see you in his office right now." So, I said, "OK and I went over there. And, when I went in, the lieutenant governor and all the senators were there. They were giving me a standing ovation. That was at the point where we were standing by the legislation, and the other organizations were not. Then, -- I didn't realize what was happening. Again, they said, "We want you to be on the floor of the House at this time." And, I showed up, and it was a joint session of the House and Senate. And, I was there along with Brad Duggan from the elementary principals as the only non-office holders to speak to the legislators.

So, at this point, we were an organization where the expression tail wagging the dog comes to mind except that we weren't even big enough to be tail-sized. We had a very disproportionate effect influencing state policy. We were able to leverage that into some gains. We did pass the Duty-Free Lunch Period Law, subsequent to House bill 72 because of the position we were in.

Start audio 5

The key to passing the duty-free lunch law was to get the guy who chairs the Calendars Committee in the House of Representatives. The Calendars Committee sets the time and date when a bill will appear on the floor. If you're in bad with the Calendars Committee, there are about 5,000 pieces of legislation introduced in any given session -- 180 days. No bill can be brought up on the floor prior to March 15, I think. That's a pretty compressed time frame. So, every lobbyist has had the experience of seeing his bill set to be bill number 798 on the last day of the session, and on the other hand, if you're in good with the Calendars Committee chair, your bill gets to be bill number one on March 15. So, Bill Messer, who was then (he's now one of these lobbyists that gets paid a gazillion dollars) a very conservative rep from Killeen area was the Chair of the Calendars Committee. I went to see the Speaker of the House and disingenuously said, "Gee, you know, we've got this bill, but I'm not sure who would be a good legislator to carry that." And he said, "Well, Bill Messer will be the man." And I said, "Oh, should I give him that message, or will you?" And so, he picked up the phone. Bill Messer was there in about five minutes. It was a done deal, I mean, (laughter) that Bill went through the house like greased lightning. Nobody wants to mess with the Calendars Committee chair. Any legislator is always terrified that he'll get crossways with him and find his bill on 798 on the last day of the session.

So, we did a lot of other good work during that time. Unfortunately, Mark White lost his bid for reelection, and lost it largely because of educators' anger against him. I don't say that they voted against him. I think that they sat out the election, and he certainly did not get the kind of support he needed. The NEA affiliate did not endorse anybody in the race.

Q: What was TFT membership, like, response to the passage?

A: Well, at that time we were a pretty cohesive group, and we lost members. But, we picked up a lot more. I think we lost all our coach members. Linda Bridges and I had a meeting in Corpus Christi because she was catching nine kinds of grief from the coaches down there over 'No Pass No Play' primarily. I said to her, "Get a meeting of all the coaches and I'll come down there and let them yell at me. You don't have to take this heat." And, I called Governor White because I said, "I'd like to have a prominent athlete." I knew he was friends with Mean Joe Green. I called the governor and said, "Could you get Mean Joe Green to come to Corpus Christi with me and speak to this coaching meeting?" So, he said, "Sure."

So, I go down there, and Linda in those days was driving this AMC Pacer. We're still getting paid next to nothing. Our salaries were less than what we would have been making as classroom teachers still at this point. I was famous for driving my cars until they collapsed. And, Linda did too. Anyway, her AMC Pacer, the headliner had fallen out years before, so it had this orange foam stuff on the top. We go and picked up Joe Green. I climbed in to what passed for a

back seat in a Pacer. And, Green gets in, and sort of fills the car up just getting in it. And, his head just smacks right up against that ceiling. So, when he gets out at the hotel, his head is orange colored. (laughter)

We had a meeting, and I got up. The coaches all hissed and booed, and I had been quoted accurately in the papers saying that I was disappointed that the test that we were all having to take did not contain subject matter material. Because it wasn't enough to me that you have to just be able to read and write, to teach you have to know your subject. And, the law called for it to contain subject matter, but the state ignored that part of the law because school districts frankly did not want the consequences of having to hire people with degrees in the subject matter they were teaching. I got up and gave the coaches my speech, and told them, "You can't have that education profession where people think you can't read and write. You just can't have it. And, agreed, this is not something that we all want to do, but it's a small price to pay to save our profession." So, one coach gets up on the mike and he says, "It's not bad enough we've got to take this test. Here comes Cole saying, 'Give us a harder one.'" (laughter) But Joe Green got up and read them the riot act.

Q: I bet.

A: He said, "I don't know what you're whining about this 70. My mama had a No Pass No Play rule. If I came home with less than an A, I not only wasn't going to play. I wasn't going to sit down."

Q: He's probably a good unionist too.

A: I'm sure he was. I'm sure he was. It was an exciting time. There was a lot of -- how shall I say it -- negative campaigning done by the other teacher organizations. I found it amusing. We do polls from time to time. My name I.D. among teachers went from virtually zero to 25% during that period of time. I attribute it to all the hit pieces that were put out blasting me. In fact, I got calls from people saying, "We just got this flier from the TSTA, and it says how horrible you and your organization are. We want to hear your side. Come out here." So, I had opportunities to go out, and..., we started new locals out of this thing through our organizing committee program. We didn't just hand them out charters. We had them go through the whole multi-year program, and picked up in the long run thousands of members that way, so that by about 1990, maybe. Well, within, I think, about 1990-'91, we actually had the 15,000 members that my predecessor had claimed. I had taken an oath when I was elected that though I would not announce to the world that my predecessor was a liar, I wouldn't claim any membership growth until we actually hit 15,000. And then after that, we would never claim members we didn't have. So, we've been an honest organization since that time.

Q: Excellent. And, part of that growth was part of your associate membership program?

A: Yes. About the same time, actually when I was first elected, that year, the Association of Texas Professional Educators started its existence. It was started by administrators to be a low dues alternative mainly to the NEA because they weren't even aware of us. Now, the Texas Classroom Teachers Association had a

different genesis. They had been part of the TSTA. And then, when NEA unified with the TSTA, the Texas Classroom Teachers Association pulled out and started its organization independently. So, when I was elected, it did not take me long to see that if we had competing organizations in those days offering $50 dues, with benefits that were equal to or better than those that we offered, our little locals would not be able to compete, and that in places where we did not have a viable local, we had two choices. We could just leave them alone and not be there, with all that that implied, or we could try to compete with a reduced dues membership. That would give us, at least, some presence in those places.

Now, about the same time I was thinking this, the AFL-CIO had a taskforce that came out with a report that was a good news/bad news. The good news: most Americans want to be members of the union. Bad news is: they think about $50 a year is right for union membership. This is a report that most of the AFL-CIO ignored because they did not like the implications of it. Most Americans, the collective bargaining aspect of unionism is lost on them. They do like the idea of an advocate organization for working people. They don't think it's worth $500-600 a year, which nowadays would be $1,000 a year. Al Shanker was talking about that report. So, Mark Chaykin, who was at that time regional director, and I, put together a proposal, which we took to Phil Kugler. And, he bought it. Then, the three of us took it to Al Shanker, and then he immediately agreed. The concept was that this would be for places where we don't have locals, where there's not much chance we're going to have a local right away, or we couldn't get

to probably anyway. But, if we should spot someplace through this program that looks like it might produce a local, then we could use this membership as an entrée to get in there and try to organize something.

I think we launched that around '85-'86, in there. Our first year, the first results were way below expectations. We learned a lot of lessons a very hard way. AFT wasted a ton of money employing -- I cannot remember the advertising agency. It's a high scale New York agency. We also squandered opportunities by the thousands because we just couldn't deal with the volume. I can remember, for example, this advertising agency hired what's called a fulfillment house. The first time I heard that term, I thought it was a bordello. But, it's a place where, when you respond to a direct mail pitch, the fulfillment house gets the response, and then actually sends you the product, your Popeil Pocket Fisherman or whatever.

The response to the first mailing we did for our associate membership program was so overwhelming that this fulfillment house fell hopelessly behind, and of course refused to admit it, and didn't say anything about that until a couple of months. It took a while to figure out that something was not right, and we finally got somebody to go there and pick up boxes and boxes and boxes of envelopes with cards in them, some with checks -- thousands of people saying "I'm interested in membership information." Of course, that window had passed at that time. Checks were six months old in some of the cases. It was very

disheartening. But, we kept plugging away at it, and the associate membership program became a two-prong attack. One, we used it as a way to have people join us where otherwise they would be members of the cheap dues outfit, and in places that we are not present, and don't want to be organizing -- and we used it to start organizing committees and building towards locals. The two different goals caused lot of tension. Phil Kugler has thought all along that I was way too slow in allowing them to apply for charters. It's always kind of a balancing act.

From my point of view, I did not want them to apply for a charter unless they could do the six point program, and have sufficient membership to be able to -- we could feel like they should be able to sustain themselves over a period of time without constant state staff help because state staff, in my opinion, was better used organizing in new areas rather than servicing members in old areas. The goal from my point of view was to get these groups where they could take care of their own service needs. Phil wanted the charters, and still wants, I'm sure, the charters much more quickly. If some of them fall by the wayside, well, you'll wind up with more members than you have. But, all in all, it's a successful program on a scale that nobody else has matched in the nation. I don't think any other union has come close to trying.

Q: Was this kind of a case study for AFT? Because you pretty much embraced that association...

A: We were the first, and at this point were almost still the only one. The three states where it was tried, and tried with some success were Texas,

Louisiana, and West Virginia. But, West Virginia has a fluke. Really West Virginia has a statewide collective bargaining agreement. I mean, they have arbitration on grievances and all sorts of things. So, they offered them -- if you pay full dues as a member at large, then you get representation in arbitration cases. Otherwise, you only get the benefits like liability insurance and stuff. Most people were willing to pay full dues to get that representation. Louisiana: they chartered locals within one year after the people were associate members. So, they had a lot of many, many little locals, and I cannot say what has happened to them now since the situation there is in such a mess because of Hurricanes Katrina and Rita.

Q: And also, now, the AFL-CIO is endorsing an associate membership.

A: Yeah, well, they endorsed it. But, here's their problem. AFL-CIO can't do much about that, although in my opinion they should. They ought to create an AFL-CIO membership. But, AFL-CIO is not a membership organization. They have to rely on their affiliates to do it. So, if you're the business agent for a carpenter's local this doesn't interest you. It has to come from a level above the local, that's for sure. If they're national level, if they start experimenting with it, some of their locals are going to start squawking. You mean, my carpenters here in this town are going to be paying $800-$900 a year, and you're going to let somebody call themselves a union carpenter over in the next town for $100? Now, we had that argument in TFT also. But, the idea of saying you're a union teacher isn't -- that isn't significant as saying you're a union carpenter. There was a fear that employers would exploit this for example.

Q: And they could.

A: I don't see how it works for the AFL-CIO unless they did something very uncharacteristic, and that's reach out into unorganized areas.

Q: I think that's where they're headed; especially the latest is they're going to organize day laborers.

A: This reminds me of right after Sweeney was elected. There was this big push to organize strawberry workers, freseros, also the blueberry workers, los moreros. And, since we have disproportionately many more Hispanic staff than anybody else in AFT when the call came, we emptied the state. At the time, I said, "Well, we're going to do this because I believe we had a lot of help from other places, and we have an obligation to respond. But, in my opinion, it's a disastrous policy." First of all, anybody who knows anything about them can tell you that you will not be successful. But, that's good because the worst things would happen would be if you were successful, and the union membership in America came to be the membership for people at the bottom rung of economic society. The reason people wanted to join unions in the past was to move up economically. We used to see all these comparisons: union labor earns this, non-union labor that. Farm workers are not going to make those kinds of wages; neither are day workers. You're going after a group of people where you better hope you fail. It's like what I was saying earlier about the bus drivers in Odessa. They can't pay enough dues to support themselves. There'd be a huge support structure needed for them, and when all is said and done, it'll be people thinking

of you as the organization you join when you're a basket case.

Now, on the other hand, the workforce in this country since the early '80s -- the information workforce has exploded. These, by and large, are people who do not think of their other employer as Ebenezer Scrooge in a top hat. These are people who come to work dressed casually, who set their own hours by and large, who work from home when they feel like it, who think of themselves as independent even if they're employed by Dell. They're thinking of new, creative things all the time. This is a far different thing from standing in an assembly line putting the same screw in over and over again, or going down into a mine and swinging a pickaxe all day. Those people, I believe, would join an organization that advanced causes they believe are important. They may not be interested in collective bargaining. And, they probably don't want to pay the collective bargaining level of dues. But, if you could put together a membership that gave them some of the things that they may not get, this is especially true if you're talking about the -- you know, a lot of these computer companies are like three people, five people. They're not going to get group health insurance. They're not going to get much of a 401k plan. Suppose you could do that for them. There are millions of those people out there.

Now, you'd have to have a product. That's the thing that made -- the associate membership program only worked because the TFT has a product. We have the lobbying efforts, the advocacy campaigns, the newsletter and information flow,

the 1-800 number for you to call if you have a question, or if your boss has told you to do something that you're not sure what the law is, and educational conferences. You've got to have all that stuff. In fact, most of those organizations, I think, are being created right now. They're just being created outside of the labor movement.

Q: Well, CWA is trying.

A: They've done a better job than most.

Q: With Washtech, and IBM-Blue...

A: But, I have to think -- Dell I would not tackle if I were doing this. I would go after smaller places. I don't know how many million people are out there right now running one to two person shops, doing stuff on PCs, putting up web pages for people.

Q: Well, look at Wikipedia: two people. Now I think it's 20, but that's just because it grew so fast.

A: That's one the AFL-CIO should be thinking about, "How can we get there?" because, that's also where America's future lies insofar as this country wants to maintain itself as a prosperous nation. The present level of things we're headed for future is Mexico with 1% of the people having 99% of the wealth. The future for the middle class is in the service industry as it relates to the information flow, and use of information technology.

But, anyway, AFT kicked around every now and then I was on the organizing committee. They still kick around daycare workers. If the entire education

committee is organized, you can take them on as a charity project. We did, in fact, try to organize them back when I was young and desperate, and did organize two daycare chains, relatively big ones. One of them had 15 sites. One of them had two sites. I negotiated two contracts. The third contract came along. Management decided just to ignore it, and did, including payroll deduction provision. Reagan's appointed NLRB overturned the lower rulings, which had given them 27 unfair labor violations. We spent I don't know how many thousand dollars on legal fees. And we wound up not one member to show for it.

But, at the best, when we had it and everything was working, out of 325 employees in 15 sites, we had an FDE - Full Dues Equivalent of about 100. They can't pay dues. They don't work full days. After, people worked two or three hours a day. They paid them very low wages. If you get the wages up high enough that they're anything like decent, management has repudiate-the-contract option, or they fold up and go away.

So, if you can't collectively bargain for them to do any good. And, by the way, those were best-case scenarios. Most daycare centers are one and two person operations. And, very frequently, they're unlicensed. The majority of Texas wants their own license. And, their family --

Q: In their private homes...

A: Yeah. So, what you have to have is something you can offer those people. It's worth them paying a little bit for, and of course if we could offer any kind of

health insurance benefit at all, group health insurance, you'd have them signing up right and left.

Q: Is that why the childcare workforce alliance is part of AFT now?

A: Yeah, but they've been unable to get around any of the problems associated with it.

Q: OK. Still trying to build it?

A: Now, New York might be a different case. You've got New York City there. That local can sustain a long-term effort-- you know, if they can invest a lot of money just to pick up bodies --

Q: Yeah, the whole state can.

A: Yeah, and that's a different dynamic.

Q: Completely. So, this leads into -- when did you start getting involved more with AFT National?

A: Well, I got elected to the executive council in '84 right after House bill 72. That was a magic year for me.

Q: Were you asked to run, or did you --

A: I ran, but I had run before. And, previously running, I knew I would not get elected. In '84, I felt I had a good chance because of the experience of that summer. And then --

Q: Were you the first Southern?

A: Not the first siouthernor... Nat LaCour's in there, of course. Pat Tornillo, and before him, Richard Batchelder -- not to mention St. Louis used to have a VP.

Q: Actually going way back, Doxey Wilkerson...

A: Now that one I don't know.

Q: Tuskegee.

A: Tuskegee. Anyway, but I was the first Texan, and sort of a prodigy in the minds of my colleagues: here's this guy from Texas whose on the council. He has no members to speak of. Why is he here? But, Al and I hit it off well from the beginning, and I, of course, worshiped him. It was a good partnership.

Q: Nice. Well, this was also a changing time for you, but also for AFT, a big shift, really, for AFT from bread and butter unionism into the realm of education professionalism.

A: Yes, and since we were way out in front on that by necessity, collective bargaining being prohibited, and the union in Corpus Christi in the early days, as I mentioned was careful to make the program heavy on education quality matters, education quality issues rather than bread and butter issues from day one. I always said, "Public relations is like a game of billiards. You have to reach your members. You have to bounce the ball off a cushion. The cushion is public opinion." A president of the union calling a press conference saying, "We demand a pay raise for teachers" is not much news. At the best, it's worth a little paragraph for one day. President of a teacher's union saying we believe every child should be able to read before moving from third grade, and that's our number one legislative priority this year. It's a different matter. You have credibility because you're representing educators. It's an issue that the public understands and can support, and it doesn't seem self-serving. We did that

campaign starting in '93. Bush picked it up later. For a time, he gave us credit on his webpage.

Q: Did he?

A: Yeah, '93... No, I was wrong, '97. '93-'95 was our Safe Schools campaign. Our top priority started out with a program that said, "There should be zero tolerance for guns, knives, or other illegal weapons at school, zero tolerance for illegal drugs at school, zero tolerance for violence directed against teachers or fellow students," and we initially said, "Zero tolerance for profanity," but we had to drop that because apparently everybody assumes it's part of a teacher's job to be cussed at nowadays. But, that was one of our more successful campaigns. We got a great law passed. On the reading at third grade, we got a great law passed. The difference on reading, when I was going around giving my speech about third grade reading, the speech included 21% of third graders failed to pass the reading portion of our state's exam. That's 21% of kids that will move onto fourth grade unable to read, and fifth grade because statistics are, if they don't get it by third grade, they don't get it. The last statistic I saw after we passed that law a couple of years down the road, it's like, 95% of our kids passed that test in third grade, first try.

Q: That quickly?

A: Well, the bill did not take effect totally until 2001. It was phased in, and it included in the first year after it was enacted in that summer, any kindergarten teacher who wanted to take classes -- and the classes were arranged and offered through regional service centers around the state -- in the latest techniques for

teaching/reading would be paid a stipend to go to those classes. The next year, kindergarten and first grade teachers: same thing. Next year, kindergarten, first, and second -- next year, kindergarten, first, second, and third. It also included phasing in a reading readiness inventory, which began the first year with kindergarten, and then the next year was phased into kindergarten and first grade, and then kindergarten, first, and second. So then, by the time the test was given, the teachers who those students had had, every cohort of those teachers that were in those grades had been to, or at least had the opportunity -- and most of them took it -- extra seminars had learned the latest skills, and in some cases gotten the only instruction on how to teach reading they ever received. Teacher prep courses are appallingly bad in that way. And, this reading readiness inventory was administered to those students before they took their test in third grade three times: kindergarten, first, second grade. And, at each administration, if a student showed poorly on it, the district was required to put that student in a special, intensive reading class.

If they showed poorly on it at the end -- if they failed after all that -- pass the test the first time in third grade, they had to be placed in a special class with no more than five other students. And, of course, they were required to be given the test repeatedly. So, it used the student testing as a diagnostic, and then built the law required to follow up. Now, I had no allusion how high school districts do these things, they lie like dogs. They cheated, and they cut corners. But still, the evidence is that it made a tremendous change in the number of students

learning to read at least at the level required to pass the state's test. And, the state's test got harder during that period. It gets harder every year. It's gotten harder every year since 1984. So, between the time we passed the law in '97 and 2001 when it first kicked in, that test was upgraded four times -- maybe not a lot each time. The states had a policy of ratcheting up the test a little bit every year since the first time it was put in House bill 72 back in '84.

Q: So, how did Bush mess it up with No Child Left Behind?

A: Well, the first time I was asked about that, I said, "He's got a great idea. We should do it, but I don't know how you pull it off with an investment from the federal level of 7% of the average school district budget." We had a heck of a time in Texas with, at that time, the state putting in 50%. And, so that's the first thing. You have to spend money. Those courses offered in summer: that costs money. Reading readiness inventory, it had to be developed. People had to be trained in its use. It costs money. Those remedial courses, that costs money. Now, the law we passed in Texas popped in something like $125 million just for that purpose. They didn't do anything on that scale at the national level. The second thing they did was they took the coward's way out and allowed states to establish the test.

So, now you have the perverse consequence. A state like, shall we say, Mississippi -- I don't know Mississippi well, but my prejudice is that their test is on about the same level as the little things that restaurants give kids to color in while they're waiting for their meal. That's the test on which their AYP is based.

Our test has been 22 years in the making and includes now at the high school level for the first time higher math/sciences is still nowhere near where we want it to be, but it's a much more difficult test than the first ones were.

And then, there's, of course, the New York Board of Regents, which is tougher than ours, and everything in between. If you were going to do this, you have to have a national test. But, nobody at the national level is prepared to fight that battle, which leads to another thing. We have a state curriculum. Most states do not have a state curriculum. But, if you don't have a national curriculum, how do you decide what should be on the test? The way we do it is we have a state curriculum that was adopted first. Then, a test was adopted to measure the parts of that curriculum we felt we could get away with measuring. And frankly, it's always been a balancing act between the sticker shock the politicians could stand on the failure rate, and covering the whole curriculum. Ideally, the test should cover the entire curriculum. We did that. A failure rate would be such that there would be calls to impeach the governor, which wouldn't be a bad thing. But, he knows that. So, he's not going to allow it.

So, your test should flow from what you curriculum is. There's no national curriculum. Most of the states don't have a curriculum for their own state. So, what value does the test have? And yet, there are consequences for schools for failing to meet these meaningless standards. What happens in the long run then, when you give the educators that kind of task: they find ways to cheat.

One of the life-changing moments: Al Shanker took a group of us in mid-'80s to tour German schools. We saw some wonderful schools, and part of the tour was we went over into what was then East Germany, and that was an eye-opener. Growing up in west Texas, everybody distrusts the government. So, I always assumed that all this anti-communist rhetoric was at least half propaganda, and maybe more. I sort of filed it under information not to be believed until independent verification is received. And, I got my first look at a communist country, and it was like, "Oh, my God." Not only was that true, it fell short of the mark.

But, when I was there, one of these guys told me a story that I found so precious about -- because it ranked so true with my experience in schools. In East Germany, a factory manager is called in. His shoe factory is producing way below its quota. They must improve. So, he's thinking about, "OK, will you let me hire some additional workers?" "No." "My machinery is out of date." "Can I update my machinery?" "No." "Well, I'll need more leather." "No." Now he's thinking about the Gulag Archipelago or, conversely, he goes back and tells his men this message and, they hang him from the flagpole. He goes back and discusses it with his workers, and they come up with the solution. Previously, a unit of production was a pair of shoes. But now, inner production will be a shoe. Within days, they've doubled production at that factory. He gets a medal. They get a flag that declares them all heroes of the communist revolution. The shoe board reports a doubling of production. Of course, people still don't have shoes,

but it works fine in every other regard. That's, like, when I heard that, I thought, "Public schools, that's..." (laughter) I come in, and they say, "You've got to get your students' test scores up." You're saying, "OK. Can I get a smaller class?" "No, we can't afford that." "Maybe you could hire an aid for me?" "No." "Well, how about some supplementary --" "No." So, you're left thinking about ways in which you can alter the appearance without actually changing the result.

Q: Absolutely. You've had a good ride.

A: Oh yeah, it's been a wonderful trip.

Q: Anything else you'd want to change, or look back --

A: The problem with changing things is that out of so many horrible mistakes that caused me such grief at the time, frequently came such wonderful things. I would not, under any circumstances, want to go back and teach at Barnes Junior High in that situation. But, had I not done that, the other stuff -- I wouldn't have learned the Spanish, I wouldn't have understood the conditions there. We wouldn't have started the union, or I would not have been involved in it. I mean, if I hadn't gotten prematurely eager and married at such an early age, I wouldn't have the wonderful daughter I've got now, even though it caused me a horrible period of struggle and toil at the time.

So, I was kind of like that, you know? I don't think you can pull a piece out of the continuum without altering all that follows. The one thing I wish I had -- I'm reminded of Bobby Lane, a great University of Texas quarterback. He used to say, "I never lost a game. Sometimes I ran out of time." I wish I had more time

allotted to me. I still feel like I have a lot to contribute. I can't do the things that need to be done. You know, we didn't talk about how it was like organizing. I alluded to it a bit, but for the first five or six years, we didn't have a travel budget in TFT.

Q: A lot out of pocket then...

A: Yeah. If you invited me to speak in your local, you've got an overnight guest and a dinner guest. Or, I turned around and drove home that night, which I did a lot of. So, many a-time I've left here, driven to Del Rio, which is about a five hour drive, give a speech, met with people, turned around, and driven home, and then got up the next day and go somewhere else. That takes a toll after a while. Being president of the TFT is a little bit like being president of the national organization: a lot of travel, a lot of distance... And, there just comes a time when the body won't go anymore. And, you can't make it do that. So, it is a pity, but there it is.

Q: Is that about it, or got something in there?

A: I think we've covered a lot of things.

Q: Yeah, we have.

A: I guess this remains to be said. For all that's been accomplished in Texas, we have just made a good start. There are 275,000 certified teachers, say, another 200,000 classified employees in public schools. Higher ed faculty altogether is probably around 50,000. We're already over 500,000 potential, and we haven't talked about support staff and higher ed. We haven't talked about any of the other organizing categories. Public employees in Texas like state employees are

unorganized, totally. There's 6,000 members of CWA, but that's it. That's it. There is so much to be done. In the next 20-30 years, this state is going to undergo a transformation of significant proportion. Hispanics have made up the majority of our pupils for several years. They will be the majority of citizens in 2020. I think minorities will be the majority in 2010. I would say 2020 -- the democratic party people say they're more optimistic -- but sometimes, between that 2010-2020 break-over period -- unless the democratic party, as it's fully capable of doing, totally blunders, is going to become a democratic state but with a difference this time. Last time it was a democratic monolith, which it was for most of my life. The democrats were, in fact, Pre-Civil War democrats. They were the worst kind of most repressive beliefs you can imagine.

So, there's a world of opportunity to be had in that period for groups like ours. The things that can be done in the next 20 years could very well dwarf what we've accomplished in these last 20, although it's true, I think. The democrats have an unerring ability to blunder. I hardly seemed to do anything else. Republicans are just handing it to the democrats right now. For a while, they weren't. When George Bush was governor, he played it so smart. He supported bilingual education. When Pete Wilson came to the state and gave a speech calling for, as he called it, "Immigration reform," George Bush denounced it and said, "We don't want you coming to the state and talking about that." George Bush never got a majority of the Hispanic vote. That's a myth. But, he did get a significant -- like 20-30% -- but more importantly he did not get Hispanics turning out in record

numbers to vote against him -- like Pete Wilson and energize the Hispanics in California because he put them to sleep.

This latest round of talk about immigration has undone all of that progress that was made when he was here. I cannot imagine -- well, he seems to be trying to have it both ways, but he isn't having it both ways. The Hispanics are not buying into his amnesty program, nor anything else as long as they're talking about building fences. For them, it's an issue that's much more visceral than people understand. Nancy Ybarra, Rene Lara, whom you met, Molly Tovar-- all three are first generation Americans. Their parents are Americans but they came from Mexico as illegals, and then became Americans. They still have grandparents in Mexico, cousins, aunts, and we're 250 miles from the border here. The farther south you move, the border becomes less and less of a dividing line and more and more of a tidal base on where things slosh back and forth. And, for them, what they're talking about is you can't go visit grandma for Christmas literally. And, she can't come visit you.

So, if the Republican Party -- and I don't know who they're going to get for president. If somebody decides the fast track to moving up in the Republican ranks is to exploit that issue. I just saw that on the New York Times. I get New York Times headlines everyday, and it was talking about GOP Seeks to Exploit Porous Border Issue. When they started doing that, they were losing the future, in Texas anyway. I don't know how it plays other places, but because the future in

Texas for the Democratic Party is brown, and the future of any political party is brown -- the Democrats right now have the market on that, and if they keep it, it will be a transformational thing.

Q: They probably won't unless we blunder it --

A: Unless it gets blundered.

Q: OK, John, thanks.

End - John Cole