THE 20th CENTURY TRADE UNION WOMAN: VEHICLE FOR SOCIAL CHANGE

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Oral History Interview

with

LILLIAN ROBERTS

American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees

by

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Program on Women and Work

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VITAE

LILLIAN ROBERTS

Born January 2, 1928 and raised in extreme poverty in Chicago's south side, Lillian Roberts is dedicated to making life and work better for the working class. Roberts herself began working at age 14 when she lied about her age to get a job in a Catholic hospital. The interest she showed in her work there led to her promotion as a nurse's aide.

After attending the University of Illinois on a scholarship for one year, lack of finances for living expenses forced Roberts to leave. She returned to Chicago to work as the first black nurse's aide at the University of Chicago Lying-In Clinic. It was here that Roberts joined the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees [AFSCME] at age 19. Although she was not active from the beginning, once Roberts became involved (she was elected steward of her local) she dedicated her life to the union.

In 1965, Roberts moved to New York City. As an AFSCME staff member, she has been involved with organizing several hospitals in that city. In 1968 she was jailed for 14 days for violating the Taylor anti-strike law when she called for a strike at Creedmore State Hospital.

Throughout her union career, Roberts has always been dedicated to the workers, despite periods of frustration. Her own statement says it best: "I have always tried to do a job for the rank and filers. They are all the encouragement I need. And they encourage me all the time."

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INTERVIEWER: Do you remember your grandparents?

ROBERTS: I remember my mother's mother and father and my father's father, but I never had the privilege of meeting his mother because she died at a very young age, in childbirth.

INTERVIEWER: Did your mother talk about her parents?

ROBERTS: They came to visit us. Her mother had asthma very bad. She died suddenly, probably from an asthmatic attack. She was in her early sixties. And her father, he also visited, probably a couple times, and he died at the age of eighty-four, of a heart condition.

INTERVIEWER: Why don't we start back, and why don't you say when you were born and where you were born, and where your immediate parents were from?

ROBERTS: I was born the second of five children in Chicago, Illinois, January 2, 1928. My mother was from Meridian, Mississippi, and my father was from Edward, Mississippi, and they came to Chicago together about two years before I was born. That was probably about 1926.

INTERVIEWER: Do you know why they left Mississippi?

ROBERTS: They were seeking employment. My mother's brother was here, and he had a wife, and they came and stayed with them until my dad was able to find a job. And then they moved out. I think my dad probably worked all of about two years, and then he never had another job. So it was really looking for employment.

INTERVIEWER: Was your mother working in Chicago?

ROBERTS: No, my mother never worked. She had five children, one right after another, and so she was home with us. And, of course, we was on welfare. And my father had terrible varicosity, you know, varicose veins, and he was semi-invalid. He had about a third-grade education. He could count very, very well, but he wasn't able to do a lot of reading, but he had an awful lot of innate intelligence.

INTERVIEWER: Did your father talk much about what it was like when he was a boy, you know, what his childhood was like?

ROBERTS: My father's childhood was--I guess I can talk about it now--was pretty secretive, because I think that he was involved in some crime in the South, and he had to go through some woods to escape, you know, and I could remember that when people would come to the house how careful he was about who they were. But all of the details centered around that....I don't know.

INTERVIEWER: Was he working when he was in Mississippi, before he came up North?

ROBERTS: Yes, he was. And I think it grew out of some forced labor on him, because he had to abandon his family. His brothers stayed away from him a very, very long time, and then I remember seeing one. But his whole background was sort of a mystery to us as kids. We just never talked about it.

INTERVIEWER: Did your mother talk much about her childhood?

ROBERTS: Yes, she do, and she did. She was one of--I think there was eight of them, nine of them, and of course a couple of them died--and she would talk about the chores each one of them had, and their dating. I got the sense that they came from a very large farm and that they was not necessarily poor. It was probably considered middle class at that time, because they seemed to have food to eat, enough clothes to look respectable, and they dated and did little things, it seemed to me. And I think they moved from Mississippi to Missouri and that's where the family is now, the rest of them. And they had several acres of land--there's twenty acres or something like that--and so they get quite a bit of farming. So I got the sense that her background was a very pleasant memory for her.

INTERVIEWER: Did she work outside her home as a child?

ROBERTS: Yes, she worked on a farm. And most of the girls did the cooking and other chores that appeared.

INTERVIEWER: Do you have any idea when she married and how old she was when she started to have children?

ROBERTS: I think she was about twenty, twenty-one when she got married, and then she started to have children two years after; then every year thereafter or every year-and-a-half until she had five of us, of which there's three of us left. But we all lived to be adults.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think that most of the responsibilities she had around the house then, as a child, were cooking and cleaning and keeping the family up?

ROBERTS: I have the feeling that she did typical female responsibilities.

INTERVIEWER: What kinds of things did you like to do and did you do with your mother as a child? Were you responsible for your younger sibs?

ROBERTS: Well, I never really never had a childhood, like the way people have it, you know. I guess I had to be an old lady at a very young age. And she had no time to bother herself, because she had all of us and absolutely just herself; and we was on welfare and it was a struggle trying to see that we had at least one meal a day and something to wear, things of that kind. And at that time they would send all welfare recipients the same kind of clothes, which was very, you know, demeaning.

I think the biggest thing she enjoyed was prayer service. And maybe that was the sanity for her--that there was a group that had prayer once a week, and she would take us to church on Sundays. I'll never forget that. We'd stay in church from early in the morning to late at night without a meal. I'd always have a headache. I would be so disgusted with that, you know, until I thought I would die. But she enjoyed it so thoroughly. And she would have to take us with her, obviously, because she had nobody to watch us, you know. But I remember that the neighbors had a lot of respect for my mother because she really was a God-fearing woman, you know, and I guess that that established principles for us. But I don't think any of us kids hang in church; we had enough church-going, but we do have principles, you know, and we do believe in what's right. I think that's what the church is all about--is to reinforce those things in you.

So we are very grateful for that. But that was not very pleasant for me. I used to be bored, very bored as a child. I had a lot of chores, because I had the family wash and I washed on a washing board until my knuckles was raw. Every week. That was religious. And then I did the ironing, you know. And I'd get up early in the morning because I liked to finish what I had to do. And I started ironing and I'd iron every two days. I can remember having varicosity at the age of twelve because I'd stand for so many hours doing that.

ROBERTS: I tried to find dirty magazines or something to read so that I could learn something. I would find them because somebody would throw them out, in the area, you know. I would sneak 'em in the house and would read 'em--True Love, Love Stories, things like that.

Going in the backyard, I can recall, we lived in a tenement that housed about 1500 people, a very large tenement, quite a different building, where you had a skylight and you could see inside. Everybody standing around a banister. So everybody sort of knew each other. It was really a little world unto itself. It was in Chicago. The structure was so different and amazing that they used to bring the architectural students from the college to see the building. Of course they probably talked about it being a slum. It certainly was at that time, but it was home for us. The people there were very close.

Of course, we were plagued by gangs--all of the things that come with poverty and boredom, you know. I lived with certain individuals--I mean, everything, you know, went on. All the vices--prostitution and just everything--robberies. There was always a knifing, a fighting, you know, something going on all the time. I guess that furnished a certain degree of excitement for people who have nothing else. You sit and look out the window; you're waking or something and you run outside, you know, I mean it's real. The drug scene was beginning quite heavily, but I guess people couldn't afford it that much, so you didn't see a great deal of it.

So my mother isolated us with her prayers. She kept us in the house because she didn't want us to get involved in these things. I think the only child that she began to let out much earlier was my oldest brother. He worked for the grocer downstairs. Even though he was sneaking drinking and all--we would tell her and she would act like she didn't hear us. I mean he would get away with murder. He would go to the movies and come back and tell us about the movies because we couldn't afford to go. So our imagination listening to the radio--Red Skelton, Captain Midnight--all these things was very, very big at about what we thought.

INTERVIEWER: Did he give some of the money he made at the grocery to your mother?

ROBERTS: Yes, he did. Yes. He would give her money that he made in the store, and I think that's why she ignored a lot of things.

My father during all of this did nothing. I think he could cut hair his own way--he taught himself--and he would occasionally cut somebody's hair for a quarter in the building, and that was his spending money. And he played policy with that, you know. Gambling, trying to get something. He would never share, even if he won anything. I can recall that.

INTERVIEWER: Did they fight a lot over that?

ROBERTS: Oh, my God. Well, my mother--they didn't fight over that, but they fought because my dad was a drinker. And he was very abusive and he didn't want her to go to church, didn't want her to go anywhere. An he would stay out all night gambling sometimes in the building, you know. Imagine them fighting over--I could see fifteen cents--big deal, you know. And then he'd come home in the middle of the night and want her to get up and fix some food and she would refuse to do it and there would be fights. Fights to the point that he had a gun and once I got in the middle of the fights to stop him--I seem to have been the one with a little more courage than the others--and the others was just screaming and trembling--I would always be in the middle of these fights--it's amazing that I didn't get killed--and push them apart and try to talk to them.

My father loved me very much. I was the oldest girl, and I guess girls love their fathers. And I knew all his shortcomings, but he was my father. And so, I would go to school frequently worrying when they'd go through these fighting things. I would be very worried about what was happening at home, sort of, to the degree preoccupied.

I remember one day I came home and there was a lot of excitement. People were outside, and he had fought my mother, and she had had him arrested because she would call the police. He was quite a con man. When the cops came he would act very innocent about it all. And he had this knife. She told them he had a knife. He had hid it and they had not searched him, and so he said, "Oh, here comes my daughter." And he said, "Would you go with me to the police station?" I was in high school at the time. I was about thirteen years old. So I went down and he sneaked the knife to me before they had the opportunity to search him. And my mother never understood where the knife was, because she wanted him put away. She felt that he was an alcoholic, and he was hallucinating. He probably was. I don't know because I wasn't sleeping with him. I wasn't paying too much attention. And I never did tell her until I got older that I was the one that had the knife. I brought it home and so on and disposed of it.

She never had him back in the house anymore. She then went to court, and she told them she wanted him out, and that he was sick. They put him in a mental institution for a couple of weeks and they found nothing wrong with him. So they let him out. And then he harrassed her and she had to get a warrant taken out. And so he was out of the house. I must say that even though he was a victim of circumstances with very limited education and no understanding of what kids needed, he was still my father. I mean, you know, when you have your only things, you know, they're yours, regardlesss.

ROBERTS: I kind of wanted them back together, and then I didn't because he fought her so that I was wondering how long she'd live. She would fight back, of course, but that was a hell of a way to live. And I always said that my criteria for a husband was that he didn't fight. It's sad, but that was my only frame of reference.

And, of course, the men around me, the young men, the boys around me that I could date when I got old enough was not the kind of fellas that I wanted because they were similar to my dad. And so it was a, I don't know, empty kind of childhood. Boy, I never really felt that I lived. I always felt that I existed throughout that whole age. And it had its toll certainly on me and my sister and my brothers because, surely they had their own feelings but they didn't share them. We never shared how we felt, because we really couldn't examine that, you know, at that point,

INTERVIEWER: Tell me what the birth order was.

ROBERTS: Well, I had an older brother named Robert, and he was almost two years older than I. And then there was myself. Then I had a brother named Odell, who was almost two years younger than I, and then a sister who was about four years younger than I. Then a baby brother who was about five years younger than I. And out of the five of us I think two was lost to that ghetto.

The brother that was two years younger than I was a drug addict and he died at the age of twenty-seven. The sister who was four years younger than I was killed by the baby's father at the age of thirty-two. He came out of the ghetto, one of the worst, and he would gamble. And he didn't want to work. There was a whole series of things, and she decided she was going to leave him, and so he killed her. I had to take, of course, her three children. So, it was a whole thing of climbing out of that whole mess that haunted me, practically all of my life.

Somehow, I really don't know, I was put in school and managed to get a scholarship. And I guess I was sort of a child that observed other people, because I loved people a lot. And I saw so much misery. I was seeing the people around me who wanted very much, um, welfare, but they didn't have children, so they couldn't get welfare. So, some of the women to survive was prostitutes. And they were forced into that kind of thing.

And then you would--my mother would share her box. I remember getting prunes and beans and things like that--that's how the welfare came--in a big box, soap and stuff that was supposed to last you for a month. And she was....everybody sort of tried to share it. And I can remember writing letters of these people and crying inside that, you know, you wanted to help and you couldn't. And it was terrible, really. I always said if I ever got an opportunity to do something, I would do something for those people, you know.

INTERVIEWER: When did you start working outside the house?

ROBERTS: I always wanted to, but I never could find a job. When I was about fourteen, I put my age up. I was going to high school, and I got a job in a Catholic hospital. I was really exploited, because I worked about eight hours after school.

INTERVIEWER: What other kind of jobs did you try to get and how did you end up in the hospital?

ROBERTS: Well, the hospital would hire someone that said they was fifteen, so I just took up my age, because they were paying nothing anyway. You worked eight hours, two weeks, and you probably got paid like eleven dollars, you know. That must have been about 1940. Then when the war was going, and if you was old enough, you could get a job in a printing place, a cup factory, and things like that. I never quite was old enough or could get those kind of jobs, because I went to school. And then finally I got this job in the Catholic hospital. Even if it was a small amount of money it gave me something, because I had nothing. I couldn't even buy lipstick and things like that. And I was getting to the age where I would want to date, where I wanted to look attractive to boys. And so when I began to work I would give my mother probably half of that, and then the rest of that I managed after several months to get a dress, a couple of little dresses. And I washed 'em and wore 'em so I wouldn't have to . . .

INTERVIEWER: What was your job?

ROBERTS: I first worked in the kitchen, washing dishes and scraping, and things like that. And then the sister, one sister liked me a lot, because I guess I didn't act like a child, I acted more like an old person. I never played around; I was very serious, and she said, "We should make her a nurse's aide." And I wanted that very much, because I wanted to do something with people. I wanted to learn, and so she did.

INTERVIEWER: Were there other black people working in the hospital?

ROBERTS: And they were all in housekeeping and in food. There was none that was nurse's aides.

INTERVIEWER: Was the patient population mostly white?

ROBERTS: Yes they was, predominantly white.

INTERVIEWER: Was it a segregated hospital? Most of them were, I guess.

ROBERTS: Uh, yes. Yes, it was. In fact, I don't remember seeing a black patient in there.

INTERVIEWER: So that for them to make....was there any problem with them deciding to have you as an aide?

ROBERTS: Well, there was quite a bit of conversation buzzing around. And I didn't really understand the ramifications and all, being very young; but this one sister, I guess, felt I had something to offer, and so she wanted me to be a nurse's aide very deperately. So I took it and I liked it, and I was there, and I just would work so hard at it that . . .

INTERVIEWER: Did they give you any....what did they do to train you? What did it mean to become a nurse's aide?

ROBERTS: Well, she would take you around and show you what to do. You did very little with patients. Nobody would tell you what was going on with the patients, you know, and the water pitchers and things like that, I would clean and deliver it, the linen packs, so that they would have their beds made up the next day, 'cause I was working pretty late. And I would scrub beds when the patients bleed and tidy up the room for the next patient, you know. And I would pass trays and things like that, collect the trays.

INTERVIEWER: Were the nurses sisters also?

ROBERTS: Yes, they were sisters.

INTERVIEWER: And how did they relate to you?

ROBERTS: Well, there was this one sister who I thought was a very, very sweet person. The others, some of them were very mean, very mean. But I just sort of stayed away from them.

INTERVIEWER: How many hours a week were you working then?

ROBERTS: I was probably working from seven to eight hours a day.

INTERVIEWER: And going to school?

ROBERTS: And going to school. It was in the evening. They knew I was going to school. And then I'd get one day off, maybe Saturday or Sunday, one of those days I got.

INTERVIEWER: Did you like the work?

ROBERTS: I loved it.

INTERVIEWER: What about it did you like?

ROBERTS: I liked being around people and trying to learn something. I'd see different things in the hospital. I remember one of the fathers had pneumonia, and they had this machine that gave out

ROBERTS: vapor with the medication in it, something that amazed me. And I'd sidle around at night and ask somebody--a hell of a way to learn, you know. I said, "What are they doing, you know?" Then they would tell me. And I was afraid to ask too many questions, because they didn't want to be bothered. I would try to read little things that I'd see. But I liked that, it was quite interesting.

INTERVIEWER: Were there other nurse's aides and were they white?

ROBERTS: Uh, some....there was a few that was black. And the sisters did a lot of the work, mainly, so I can recall them. Nobody ever touched the patients, none of the nurse's aides. The sisters who were to function as nurse's aides would pick up all the sponges.

So to be a nurse's aide wasn't like the nurse's aide of today, making the bed and rubbing the backs and things of that kind. It was more custodial....take care of the creature comforts of the sick person.

INTERVIEWER: And how long did you do that?

ROBERTS: Well, I probably did that for most of high school. I can recall that it was supposed to be a very popular thing then that blacks could sing, and I think I can't sing today because I resented it, and I....they wanted to have a chorus there, and they wanted all the blacks to get together and sing, and I refused. I just downright refused, because I felt, I don't know what I didn't feel about that. I resent having anyone to feel that as a black I was different from anybody else. I just wanted to be like someone else, you know, not different. And so, I used to think about that once in awhile, when they would talk about it, I'd always find an excuse not to be there. But I was polite about it, you know. But that was at a time when I guess that anger began to appear to me. At fifteen, sixteen years old and you're black, there's a certain startled awareness that comes about. I think you are pretty isolated when you're in a ghetto, and you.... blacks and the outside world doesn't....it impacts upon you and isolates you, but you don't realize it. And finally you begin to realize when you're out there trying to start off.

INTERVIEWER: Was the hospital outside the ghetto?

ROBERTS: Yes, it was.

INTERVIEWER: How did you end up at that particular hospital?

ROBERTS: I heard they had been hiring....some of the girls in high school.

INTERVIEWER: So did you know other people working in the institution?

ROBERTS: Yes, there was probably one other young lady, and her mother had brought her there. And then I asked her, and she said, "Oh, you gotta be sixteen." And I went down, and kept going down and finally they hired me. They had a good meal there, that was one nice thing. They fed you very well. You had what the patients had and the food was good.

INTERVIEWER: Were you able to take food out? Was it that stage where the hospitals sort of....looked the other way when people took food home to their families? Or were they pretty nervous about that?

ROBERTS: I never did it. I don't think there was anything left. I think the other women did who worked in the kitchen. They would take from the trays. But I didn't work in the kitchen after awhile and I couldn't....and the sisters and whatnot would always be coming, and I didn't want to do things I wasn't supposed to do, you know. They didn't say you wasn't supposed to, but some of the women you worked with were very illiterate in many ways, was quite mean, you know, and I was always working with a woman, you know.

INTERVIEWER: Did you stay there all through high school?

ROBERTS: I was there through most of high school.

INTERVIEWER: And then, what happened after that?

ROBERTS: I finally got old enough to get a job at a printing place.

INTERVIEWER: This was about '44 by now?

ROBERTS: Yes. And I worked at night, and there was a lot of youngsters and whatnot that worked there.

INTERVIEWER: What made you switch jobs?

ROBERTS: It paid so much more. It was almost like two-and-a-half times more, you know. And so I needed to start getting ready for graduation and all these other things, and finally I got old enough so that they would accept me. And I went there, and I was jogging. That means to take things off a conveyer, you know, and stack them and so on. Later on I got good enough to do a little mechanical work, keep the machines going, you know. And so I pretty much stayed there until I . . .

INTERVIEWER: Were most of the workers black in the printing company?

ROBERTS. Yes. It was mixed. But they was getting those jobs while others was working in defense plants.

INTERVIEWER: Were there men and women in the plant? Were the jobs segregated? Were there female jobs and male jobs?

ROBERTS: Yes. The men did a lot of the mechanical stuff. As the war progressed, though, they'd train you to do other things that sometimes the men would do. Mainly because they didn't have male staff.

INTERVIEWER: Did you like that work?

ROBERTS: Not really. It was....I was a thing at that point, not a person. You have to become part of the machinery and all. And the people, I never did particularly care for the people. Because I was very young and they were older, and they seemed to be drifting into nowhere to me. And I thought that they were....again, it was all that religiousness around me. I thought some of them....the courting that went on, and they were married, I thought those were terrible things. And I really was very courteous and they liked me, but I was sort of distant because I must have been eighty years old at a very young age, you know. With everything impacting up on me in the fullest degree with very little moderation, you know, and understanding, because I hadn't had these experiences. My way of looking at things was probably a little bit extreme.

INTERVIEWER: What did....did you have any sense, then, about what you were going to do when you graduated?

ROBERTS: Not really. Even when I went off to college, I really didn't know what I wanted to do. And I finally decided that maybe I would like to be a teacher. But none of those things appeared to be fulfilling to me. My aspirations as a nurse, I didn't see that. I certainly didn't see becoming a doctor. Or any of those things, because you see, another thing is, I didn't have any heroes. That's very important. It's almost like you don't belong, you know? It was just a very strange feeling. I used to look at my mother and wonder why she would live in a society without almost saying, "Well, this is terrible. I'd rather be dead than to be alive. Because what is there for me? This ho-hum, am I just to exist?" You know.

And finally, in high school I had to come right home because there was gangs and all. My mother was very strict about you getting home on time and all these other things. And I didn't enjoy it, because I couldn't go to the dances, I didn't have dresses and things like other kids. I felt very inferior, inferior to other black kids, because I didn't have, you know, things.

INTERVIEWER: Was your family poorer than a lot of other kids in the neighborhood?

ROBERTS: Oh, yes. We was on welfare and had to wear welfare clothes. You're earmarked. You're on welfare, so you're less than somebody else. So even if their parents had something that was not from welfare that they wore, it gave them a certain amount of prestige within that ghetto that she didn't have. These are things that impact upon a child, and they don't say anything, but they take their mark.

So I felt a bit inferior, and I was very quiet in school. I didn't want to be seen and known, you know. And I didn't think I was pretty for a boyfriend or anything, because I didn't have anything, you know. That's a funny feeling. So when the boys started looking at me, I was sort of surprised. You know? It's just funny, when you think about what was happening to you during all that time and what you was thinking all that time.

INTERVIEWER: Did you think you were going to get married and have kids? Was that part of what you thought was going to be your life?

ROBERTS: I did. I wanted very much....but there was very little she [Mother] could do about it, and I think her contribution to that was, in spite of the ghetto we all finished high school.

INTERVIEWER: That's amazing.

ROBERTS: And she insisted upon that, you know. I was an honor student. So she insisted on trying to get me a scholarship, which she did. And I was approaching eighteen then, and she managed through a black politician to get the scholarship. But then she couldn't get the room and board. The scholarship was out of town. And so my brother then was able to get himself a paper route, which paid him a little bit more than the grocery store, and he was getting on to the age when he was going to be drafted during the war. But he said that he would send the money for my room and board. So I then gathered my little belongings, which I had accumulated a few things--a trunk full--that I could take off to school.

And I went to school and I stayed with a family because I couldn't stay on campus. It was too much money, so I stayed with a black family. My brother would send his money in order to pay for room and board. It was like forty dollars a month. And they would all be doing the best they could,

ROBERTS: plus the neighbors who I used to write the letters for would send quarters and fifty cents, and things like that. It was just the warmest feeling.

INTERVIEWER: You went to the University of Illinois, right in Champaign-Urbana?

ROBERTS: Yes. Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Were there many other black students at the time?

ROBERTS: Very few black students.

INTERVIEWER: Boys or girls?

ROBERTS: Uh, mostly boys. There probably was....I could only see about two or three other black girls.

INTERVIEWER: Were you scared?

ROBERTS: We were truly isolated. And then not to have the proper clothing, you know. I don't need to tell you that I never went near the sororities; I stayed the hell away from it, you know. And I would walk to school--which was a long distance--and I had breakfast, but I couldn't eat until I came back because we didn't have lunch money or anything like that. I was taking liberal arts. And I, I just felt so alone because I couldn't share with people the embarrassment of the poverty that I suffered. And they did better because their parents had more, you know, to offer.

Well after about a term and a half my brother was drafted into the service, and I no longer had the room and board; and the woman would ask me for it, and I would do chores at the house to be helpful, but I just felt so bad, you know, because I couldn't help it. And I said, "Well, I guess I just have to go home."

So I then picked up near the end of that term and went home, and they told me that when I was ready that I could come back. But it was just so many ugly memories, and I said, "I have to get a job now, obviously." And I was so angry at society that here I was on welfare. I did not want welfare, I was humiliated by it, and they were doing absolutely nothing to help me to get out of that situation. They wouldn't pay the room and board or anything, in spite of the fact that there was a scholarship.

INTERVIEWER: Were there other black students there who were middle class?

ROBERTS: Yes there were. Their parents....they either had two parents with pretty good jobs or professional. I probably was the poorest thing that ever creeped across the campus.

INTERVIEWER: How were the teachers toward you?

ROBERTS: I was sort of withdrawn and they realized that. And a couple of them would try to....when I said something, I knew what I was talking about and all, but I just, just would not open up, you see. I just wouldn't open up to them at all. And I knew why, but that was my little secret, you know. And they wanted me to feel welcome. And I'd sit in the back of the room and didn't want to say anything. And all at once they'd look around and say, you know, "Lillian, you want to....you know," and then I'd say what I had to say. Then they would want to probe that a little more because maybe it would be a little profound, and I, I wouldn't go into it.

But, at any rate, I went home and I started looking for a job. I'd heard about this hospital job; this was in 1946 that I went home.

This job was at the University of Chicago, Lying-In Clinics. So I decided to go over there, and there was a nursing supervisor who came from New York. And while they never had any black nurse's aides, she was going to hire her first one. That was me.

INTERVIEWER: Do you know why she decided to do that?

ROBERTS: Uh, well I don't think she had too much of a choice because the war had taken most of the whites away from those menial jobs into jobs that were paying a lot more in defense plants. And so they was really uptight about help at that point.

INTERVIEWER: And they didn't have volunteers from the Red Cross working at that point.

ROBERTS: Well, the volunteers, they was going the other way. Very few volunteers, because they was probably in the, you know, giving doughnuts and coffee to the young men, you know. It was a whole war atmosphere at that time. And the maids even at that hospital were white. The kitchen personnel was black. The nurse's aides were all white.

And so I appeared on the scene to be employed, and she screened me very carefully. And she didn't tell me that I was the only black but I quickly found that out.

INTERVIEWER: Did you go to the hospital looking for an aide job?

ROBERTS: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: That's what you decided.

ROBERTS: Yes, that's what I was going to do because I enjoyed it very much. And I said, "Well, I'll go there, and I'll try to get enough money and I'll go back to school."

INTERVIEWER: Did you think at all about going back to the printing place?

ROBERTS: No, I didn't want that kind of job. I really didn't want it. I realized I could make more, but I wanted to do something that I felt I....I really needed something at that time to feel that it was necessary for me to even go on living, you know. So I took that job.

And right away some of the people in the kitchen told me that they didn't have black nurse's aides. So, I didn't think nothing of that. I was about eighteen, nineteen then. And so I proceeded to do my job, and I loved it. I never wanted to be bossed a lot, so what I did was find out what is it I'm responsible for, and I did that. And I would do more than that, because I didn't want to be ruled all the time.

INTERVIEWER: What were your responsibilities?

ROBERTS: I worked in the nursery, that was the first job. And that was diapering and feeding the babies. I did a lot more there. Cleaning, first of all. I did a lot of cleaning and I kept things sterile, and got the formula ready for the babies and all. And before long, it may be too, that I had a little more education than the run of the mill, so if you got to get somebody black, they got to be, you know, a little better.

INTERVIEWER: Super qualified.

ROBERTS. Right. And the salary at that time was fifty-eight dollars every two weeks. And they paid you every two weeks, and there was a little union there. And I decided that it was only fair if I worked and got paid--that just, just a sense in my own mind that that was the proper thing to do. But I knew nothing about unions at that time.

INTERVIEWER: I was going to ask, was there anybody around you when you were growing up that was involved in a union?

ROBERTS: Nobody. All I would hear of occasionally was a strike, and then I would hear that the union, you know, got some money. And that was the extent. But there was always a tax on the union, you know. All those thugs, and how bad, you know. It was a necessary kind of evil, maybe, you know. I hadn't evaluated that.

INTERVIEWER: Was it white and black patients in the hospital?

ROBERTS: Just about all white patients, and there was an isolated area and it was called the map where they put black patients.

INTERVIEWER: The map.

ROBERTS: Uh-huh.

INTERVIEWER: Do you know why it was called that?

ROBERTS: Well, they would put contaminated patients over there, and so I gathered they thought black patients was contaminated, so that's where they put them. And they would be patients that they were doing experiments on. Patients who had cancer of some kind, and they was under observation, and that kind of thing. But you was not admitted to that kind of hospital.

INTERVIEWER: Was it a teaching hospital?

ROBERTS: It's a teaching hospital.

INTERVIEWER: In the University. Did they slowly let you do more responsibilities with the children?

ROBERTS: Yes, I remember when I was in the nursery, and it was, of course, glass around the nursery. And you would think that I was some monkey on display. The doctors and everybody was looking in the window. And just constantly watching me. And it was the kind of watch, this one doctor, that he was looking for some reason to say, "Get her out of there." Because you had to wash your hands in-between babies and all; he wanted to know whether I was observing the techniques and all.

And I was working with a southern nurse, and it was a pleasant experience for me. She was a white southern nurse by the name of Mrs. Montique, and I guess I'll never forget that name. And she was kind of chubby, but very pleasant. And I found her

ROBERTS: delightful. It was just she and I. So we got along very well. And I was able to relate to her, asking her every day I wanted to learn something new. And I said, "I want to learn, because I want to do a job." And so I would ask her about all kinds of deformities that we would see in the nursery: the color of a baby, and why this was happening and why the other thing was happening. And then I explored with her using my own analysis of things. Sometimes I'd be right just in observing and putting some common sense in it.

INTERVIEWER: Uh-huh.

ROBERTS: And we were talking about a whole series of things. It was a very pleasant experience. Before long, when the interns would come to examine the babies, I could tell them what was wrong with every baby. I'd have them lined up for him. And they got so that they depended upon me, because I really got to know.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think that some of the nurses and some of the physicians were threatened by....because I've had friends who have been nurse's aides who've had very bad experiences where, if you start asking a lot of questions you basically get told that that's not your responsibility and you shouldn't ask.

ROBERTS: Well, that's why....Mrs. Montique was so nice, because you see, we was forced together because there was only the two of us there. And we might have had about forty babies, and we had to work so hard to try to get them fed and get 'em out and get 'em in and change 'em and take care of 'em, you know. And so, we would pass it off by talking and working and, and so on. We really had a good relationship going.

Some of the nurses--student nurses--and others who relieved, I had gotten so good at it, with so many compliments from so many people going down to the office--I didn't realize it--that they scheduled me when she was off, to be in charge. And they didn't tell you you was in charge, but I'd get a whole mess of new students in there who didn't know what to do and I would very diplomatically have to direct them, although they resented to hell that I was both black and a nurse's aide. But I had to do it in such a way that they didn't feel that I was claiming to know more than they did.

And I realized that. Because they said, "Well, you're just an aide, and blah...." I says, "I know that." I says, "I'm not concerned about that, but we do have feeding times here." And I would go on to talk about what we had to do and how would they suggest we go about doing it, as if they anything, they never had worked with them. But that was the kind of thing that I found I had to do.

INTERVIEWER: Was your job category called nurse's aide? There were fights in that period about what you would call the job.

ROBERTS: I was called a nurse's aide at that time. I later went on to get a different title, but I moved around. I stayed in that particular nursery about five years. And I figured I had had about enough of the nursery. And during that time I was so good with the youngsters that they gave me the responsibility of running the little operating room they had when the babies was circumcised. They would bring them from all over and I would have to put them on a board and take care of them while the doctor did the circumcision. And really, there never was any infections or anything like that, so when I got ready to leave the nursery they wanted me to take that chore with me. And I said, "No. I want to go down to the emergency room. I want to do something else." And they just didn't trust anybody else to do that but me, I don't know. And if the doctor would leave a baby, because I knew them so well, and I thought it was going to bleed, I leave the baby for awhile and I'd just call him back. I didn't want the child to go downstairs, and then all at once, you know, start hemorrhaging.

So the doctors, they get to know that you know your job and you can tell them certain things, and, "I think it would be wise if you did this," but you'd always have to do it in such a discreet way not to step on their pride, because they're supposed to be the expert, you know.

And finally, you know, I wanted to go to the emergency room so I could work more with the adult patients and learn something about them. We would get most of the women who would have "gyn" problems, or they would be aborting or having a baby in a hurry, things like that. And they would be frightened. And, it was, I felt good counseling that they certainly was going to be all right, and give them a certain amount of confidence and all. And you'd assist the doctor down there; there was no nurse. So I did that for a long time. I enjoyed that, too, and then I would be in the infant area while we were waiting for the emergencies, working in the sterilizing room, preparing the instruments throughout the place and putting them in the autoclave, and things like that.

INTERVIEWER: Was the decision about what kind of things you would do kind of done on an ad hoc basis? You know, kind of, "Gee we need an extra pair of hands here, can you help us?" I mean, is that how you learned?

ROBERTS: Yeah, they never had any formalized training for me. I learned by experience and I would ask questions.

INTERVIEWER: Was that true for other aides in the hospital?

ROBERTS: No, as they got more they began to have classes for them.

INTERVIEWER: Did you spend much time with other aides? Or were you just with the individual doctor or nurse?

ROBERTS: Well, I was working alone in the nursery, but in the emergency room there was other aides and I spent time with them. And had great friendships with them. I was fortunate enough to be working with a very good person. And we worked hard. We was left on our own on weekends. There was nobody in charge, and we would carry the place without any problems whatsoever.

INTERVIEWER: You and another aide?

ROBERTS: Yeah, me and another aide.

INTERVIEWER: You were in charge of the emergency room by yourselves?

ROBERTS: Yes, the emergency room and also the central supply. And we'd have to keep the things moving and check to see that everybody had supplies and deliver them to the floors and make sure the fresh ones were stacked, and the whole bit.

INTERVIEWER: So the kind of work that a housekeeping aide would do now, you did that in addition to what an aide would do.

ROBERTS: Well, that's not a housekeeping aide's job. Central supply is a very technical area of work, where you really have to trust the person in there because they have to sterilize all the different instruments that went throughout the place, whether they going to the operating room or whether they going to the floor, they had to be delivered. They had to have needles, you know, at that time you didn't have the disposable needles and syringes, you know.

Sometimes we'd make fluids--the glucose and the saline--these are very important things, you know. And we had to do that in addition to assisting the doctor whenever something was going on, you know. We even was involved in artificial insemi-nations that went on there. That was a very interesting program some of the doctors was engaged in. And then I went on to the operating room.

INTERVIEWER: Did you have a sense, first when you were in the emergency room and before that in the nursery, that there was some variety--in other words, that you didn't do the same small number of things, but that there was always an opportunity to learn more? Were there limitations?

ROBERTS? There was, there was limitations. But there was variety. And then you get to the point where you conquer that and you want to go on to something else. I mean that was my feeling. I wanted to learn something else. So when I got to a boredom stage, I wanted to move on because it was important, you know. I looked forward to the job when I thought there was something in it.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think there was....it sounds to me different than other aide programs that I've heard about where there was just more of a chance to let you learn other things. I mean they didn't keep you . . .

ROBERTS: Well, they would want to keep you, but I think that the union was good in that regard because if there was a vacancy, I would have a right to apply. And some of the aide categories paid more than the other aide categories because of the degree of responsibility that was, you know, in the job. And, therefore, when I went on to central supply, that was an area where it paid more. And also, the hours were quite different. I didn't have to work evenings and nights and all these different things. Of course, when I was hired I was hired for days anyway. I really never worked the evening and night shifts. I always worked the days, because I had an opportunity because of the seniority I built up. I stayed there thirteen years, so then I moved on to areas where I'd even have Saturdays and Sundays off.

INTERVIEWER: What was the union, do you remember?

ROBERTS: Yes. It's the same union I work for now. I've been a member of the union since I was about....I'm now forty-nine years old....since I was about nineteen. I'm probably one of the oldest members in it.

INTERVIEWER: That's right. How early had the union organized the hospital?

ROBERTS: I think probably about two, three years prior to me coming there. And it was a very weak union, you know. You paid hand dues. It didn't have check-off at that time. If you paid, all right, if you didn't, you know. But I did. I just felt responsibility to do so. I remember being very lonely, because while there were blacks in the kitchen, there was no black aides, and the white aides didn't want to talk to me. So I sort of ignored them. I mean, at that point, who cares?

INTERVIEWER: Were they older white women? Or younger?

ROBERTS: Older. They were older than I. I was very young, too, you know,

ROBERTS: compared to them. And they just looked at me with curiosity, and I never bothered. And finally they got to the place to kind of like me, 'cause I didn't bother anybody. They would be knitting and all, and I started learning during my breaks as well as they did, and we'd talk and we got to be very, very good friends.

INTERVIEWER: Were they mostly eastern European women? I mean, do you remember what ethnicity they were?

ROBERTS: Irish, Polish.

INTERVIEWER: And had they been aides a long time?

ROBERTS: Yes, I would say. To me at that time being an aide four or five years meant that they didn't have that kind of seniority.

INTERVIEWER: Did they tend to stay in the hospital for a long time, or was there a high turnover in the aides?

ROBERTS: No, there was a pretty stable population. I guess then that those who was going to leave left. It was after I came that it was more turnover, quite a bit more turnover with the new people who came after me. But not with the old people.

INTERVIEWER: Do you have a sense about why it changed? I mean, why it . . .

ROBERTS: Because there was more opportunities, and they would only use that as a holding station and find other jobs that paid more. Things were opening up then.

INTERVIEWER: Did you ever think about leaving to get a better job?

ROBERTS: Not really. After I had been there for awhile....I really didn't. I was hoping to make that a better job, and I, I was a little angry that they was always crying about not having nurses, and there was never an opportunity for a person like myself to be one. I loved it, and would have been a very good one, I thought. I always felt that I was cheated out of that opportunity.

INTERVIEWER: Because you couldn't have afforded to go to nursing school?

ROBERTS: No. I couldn't....I needed the income, and you can't just quit the job and go to school, you know, and I was caught in a box, and the salary wasn't big enough to save enough to go to school. And getting into the nursing schools was a real racist problem as well. So there was a combination of many things. And I

ROBERTS: used to say, "Why does this country have to go elsewhere and get people when people like myself want to do something. We really want to do it, and we're not forced into it." And that was always a dream of mine. So I guess that when I went on to organizing that was one of the first things that I saw was done. I'm still living in that fantasy.

INTERVIEWER: Was there a black nursing school in Chicago that you knew about at all?

ROBERTS: Well, Providence Hospital had somewhat of a nursing school, and that's a black hospital.

INTERVIEWER: But you couldn't have afforded . . .

ROBERTS: No.

INTERVIEWER: Were you giving money to your family at the time? Were you still living at home? And helping to support?

ROBERTS: Oh, yes. I was helping my mother.

INTERVIEWER: What was your life like outside the hospital?

ROBERTS: When I went away to school, I met my husband. And he was a serviceman who had come home because of his mother. And he was quite a bit older than I but very nice person, a good family. It was a pretty nice family I would say. They had a family life I never had. They were sort of like middle class in a way. And the mother and father was in the house. That was a big bonus, I thought. They didn't fight each other, and I thought that was an extra bonus. And it was more like, you know, the sister was there, and she was dating, and doing all the things that I wish I had had an opportunity to do. And she would look pretty, was fixing her hair, and going out, and so on. And he came home, and....he liked me, you know. And I kind of liked him, because he was different, and he wasn't the ghetto kind that did all these other things. And he met me, I guess, as a rebound to a divorce, because he had been married before.

INTERVIEWER: Did his family live in the southern part of the state or were they in Chicago?

ROBERTS: He was in Urbana, Illinois where I went to school. And I stayed with that family.

So I never thought too much about it. Then after I got to work, you sort of spread out and somebody will see you on your way to work or something and start trying to date you, and so on. And so I was getting a little broader view, you know, of people outside the ghetto. And, finally, he got out of the services and he came to Chicago looking for me. And he found me, and of

ROBERTS: course the fellas around there said that he was in their turf. This is the way they are. And my brothers let them know that he was there to date me, and, you know, back off. So they did. And I liked him because he was the most decent thing that I had met. And he was a hard-working man, pretty stable and so on.

INTERVIEWER: What did he do?

ROBERTS: He was a silk screen operator. And I don't know if you know anything about that.

INTERVIEWER: No.

ROBERTS: And so, although he had to pay heavy alimony, he was the hand that really helped me out of the ghetto. I wanted to, first, have a man. I was at the stage where I wanted to be loved. And I wanted a little house, a little apartment, a room, something of my own, because I never had that. So we got married, with very....we saved our money, and he would give me five dollars and I'd put five or three or something . . .

INTERVIEWER: How old were you when you got married?

ROBERTS: I was about twenty, twenty and a half. And so we saved our little money, and we had about four hundred, five hundred dollars. That's a lot of money for us. And we got married and had a little reception in my mother's ghetto house, because that's where my friends were. And they brought their little gifts. You know, we must have had a thousand little cups and things. And it was quite nice. And we both worked hard and we didn't have much to save. If it was fifty cents a week, I saved it. You know, I, I really learned that I had to do that, to have something. I felt like....there was nobody for me to depend on. I had to depend upon myself.

INTERVIEWER: Was there ever any question given that he was a skilled worker that you would continue to work? I mean, did that ever . . .

ROBERTS: His salary was very small, very small.

INTERVIEWER: Uh-huh.

ROBERTS: And when he finished giving his little eleven, twelve dollars a week to his wife who had two kids by him, that there was very little.

INTERVIEWER: Uh-huh, I see.

ROBERTS: So . . .

INTERVIEWER: So that it was never a question.

ROBERTS: No. I couldn't afford even to have kids at this stage of the game, but it was still refreshing to get away and be able to buy a dress occasionally, some shoes and things like that. And by then, you know, I was working hard on seeing how we could one day afford a car, so I could see more than just Chicago. Things of that kind. And we did. And finally, he got a little part-time job, and we saved that money, you know. We continued in a very struggling way, but it has nice little memories, because I think it was good training, you know. The appreciation, and he taught me a lot, you know. I used to have to budget so I had my budget for the whole week. Every week I knew exactly how much was going for everything, down to the quarter. And finally we got enough money. I remember the first thousand dollars to put down on a car. We was, we was like kids, we were on the floor throwing those bills up and down, and just, just.... it was the happiest moment, you know, because we was going to have something that we could go to visit his family with, and I could see, being on the road, other things, you know? It was....a thrill.

INTERVIEWER: Were you giving any money to your families?

ROBERTS: Yes, I was still giving my mother, not much, but I would give her like five dollars or something like that a week, or every other week, when I could afford it.

INTERVIEWER: Do you want to fill me in on the family bible?

ROBERTS: Yes. My father's name is Henry Davis, and he was born in Dublin, Mississippi, May 12, 1901. And he died July 10, 1971. My mother's maiden name was Lillian Henry, and she was born August 3, 1903, in Edward, Mississippi, and, um, she's still alive. So that's basically my father and mother. I don't think you asked about my grandparents.

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember much about who they were?

ROBERTS: My mother's been alive, so I've kept that from her. But her father's name was Caleb Henry, and he was born in Edward, Mississippi. And her mother's name was Annie Arnar, and she was born in Edward, Mississippi as well, in the year of.... he died at eighty-six, I have to figure out those years. He died in 1953, and he was eighty-six years old. She died in 1942, and she was sixty-nine.

INTERVIEWER: Were they farming? Do you remember what they did?

ROBERTS: They had land. I think I told you it was eighty acres or something. But I understand there's three hundred acres of land in Missouri. And they do farm.

INTERVIEWER: They left Mississippi to go to Missouri.

ROBERTS: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: I had a couple of questions when I listened to the other tape to fill in background questions.

ROBERTS: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: One was, I was just curious, did you have much of a relationship in your family with the neighbors? Was there a lot of sharing with the neighbors? Or were there other kind around that you mostly shared with? I was just curious whether . . .

ROBERTS: Well, we never stayed around relatives, except my mother and dad stayed with them until my dad got his first job. So that was a matter of months, I think. That's the way the people from the South went to the North. There was a little sharing in that....you see, nobody really had anything, but in terms of meals sometimes the single individual who could not get welfare would come to our home and have dinner. My mother, when she got her box from welfare, would give them some of the dried beans and prunes and things that we, you know, had in the box. Because they just wouldn't give people who didn't have kids welfare.

Some of the people around who was probably a little better off because maybe both parents was able to work, would give away the clothes from their kids to my mother, because she had five youngsters, and some of us wore them. I frequently think that's probably why my feet was really ruined, because I wore everybody's shoes.

INTERVIEWER: Did you ever have boarders in the house? Did other people ever stay in the house other than family?

ROBERTS: At one time my mother's brother came from the South and stayed for a few months until he got a job. And he had three kids and a wife, and I hate to tell you what it was like with all of us piled into....we never had more than four-room apartments--three in one bed. My baby brother slept with my sister and I, and there was two in the other room, my other two brothers and my mother and dad. So when they came around, it was really very . . .

INTERVIEWER: I'll bet. But your mother never kept boarders who weren't family.

ROBERTS: No. It was against the welfare, and of course she didn't have room for that.

INTERVIEWER: I didn't know that.

ROBERTS: Oh, you couldn't do anything like that.

INTERVIEWER: Did people do it sometimes and hope welfare didn't catch them?

ROBERTS: Well, basically they didn't. Because, first of all, at that time you had workers who came around and around. That was number one. Number two, they never did have the kind of room that permitted that. They just barely existed themselves.

INTERVIEWER: I was just curious. In the early immigrant period a lot of times even in that kind of small space that's how people made it; they would keep a lot of boarders and charge them a small amount. I was just curious.

ROBERTS: I do remember that if someone was put out....there was the single individual, male and female who may have not been able to pay--might have lost their apartment or room where they were staying, and she would let them sleep maybe in the kitchen or on the floor, or something, until they could find something--at no charge.

INTERVIEWER: When you talked about going to the University of Illinois, I was just curious, was that the only choice that you had because of the way the scholarship worked?

ROBERTS: Yes. That was my only choice. I always felt that that was a teaser. Because if you don't have room and board, I mean, you know, it's just awful.

INTERVIEWER: Yes.

ROBERTS: Of course we didn't have the City University and all those things in Illinois, and so I couldn't enjoy that.

INTERIVEWER: There's no black college in Illinois that the scholarship might have....so that University of Illinois was the only place you could have gone.

ROBERTS: And that was obtained by one of the local politicians. And I guess that's all that he could come forth with.

INTERVIEWER: Uh-huh. How did your mother happen to have a relationship with him? I mean, how did she . . .

ROBERTS: Well, she was pretty much for a lot of causes....for instance, the schools were--it's like the same fight--they were not good, and they didn't give....see, my mother in her day, even though her education was somewhat limited, she taught in the South for a very limited period of time some basic things like addition, multiplication, you know. She used to drill us like crazy on tables. We all knew our tables. And maybe, reading, you know--the "thes"--the dogs, and the ball, and so on. And so, she knew that we was not getting a well-rounded education, because of not having history and all the other things. She'd go up and speak to the principal, which was unheard of at that time. And I guess they would try to get her off their backs by, you know, talking to the politicians who would want to appease and try to explain to you that, you know, you're wrong, and so on. So they got to see her.

And then, of course, at one time they wanted to sell the building that we was in, and at that time they didn't have such things as relocating individuals, and there was over....close to two thousand people in the building in which we lived. And these people had no place to go. And they had to stand up and fight, and she was quite a leader in that struggle. So they hung on to the building for a very, very long time. It had a sound structure, but it was not kept up. You know, the same viciousness: once minorities move in, it's abandoned.

INTERVIEWER: Were they able to win, keeping the building?

ROBERTS: Well, they did initially. Probably they kept it another seven years as a result of that fight.

INTERVIEWER: How old were you when that happened?

ROBERTS: I guess I was probably in high school, so I was somewhere between fourteen, fifteen, sixteen and seventeen.

INTERVIEWER: What did you think about all the stuff that she did. I mean, were you proud of her or did you think it was embarrassing that your mother did this stuff? What did you think?

ROBERTS: Well, I must have been a bit proud. Because when I was in school, and they came up to investigate the schools, the teacher which I had which taught us nothing, singled me out, you know. And she tried to talk in such a way that I would be isolated from

ROBERTS: the other kids by talking about my mother. And so when they came in, the investigators came in and asked us if we had history and all that, she had told them that when they come that we should say that we had it. And I was not going to lie, you know. And so when they asked us to raise our hand whether we had it or not, most of the kids raised their hand. And they asked those who said that we don't have history or what have you, I raised my hand. And so then she wanted me to move out of my seat and go into the cloakroom. She was very annoyed with me. And I don't know what she was going to do in the cloakroom. So I said, "For what reason?" So then she proceeded to push me out of my seat, and I went in there. And she really didn't know what to do with me, but she was so annoyed with my mother, I think she could have choked me. And I disliked her because she wanted me to lie and make a fool out of my mother, and it was making it pretty hard for me as a child, but I was a pretty good student, so I just sort of ignored her. You know, stayed on in school. But it was not easy, because she was really trying to get the other kids to feel that I was a problem. She did that with her tactics and, of course, I was pretty young. I was in grammar school. I was probably about ten, eleven years old. That was pretty dramatic for me, you know. But my father wouldn't hesitate to come up and rip the school apart if anything happened to his kids. Therefore, I didn't feel like nothing physical was going to happen. But we always was taught to fight together, you see. Being five of us, and three of us was in school, you know, I didn't think I was in that much danger. But . . .

INTERVIEWER: Was it an all-black school?

ROBERTS: Yes it was.

INTERVIEWER: And were the teachers black or white?

ROBERTS: Mostly white. Only about two or three black teachers. It was the same scene as today.

INTERVIEWER: Yeah, it sounds familiar. I used to work on the lower east side. It sound the same. I was just curious, could you spell Mrs. Montique's name?

ROBERTS: Um, M-O-N-T....I-C-H or something like that. I really can't remember.

INTERVIEWER: I was just curious about....when you were growing up was there much discussion in the community or in the family about unions at all? or the CIO? or people being involved in scabbing? Anything about unionization that would have given you any experience with that?

ROBERTS: Not at all, because very few people worked around there. They were on welfare. Or they did domestic work, or something where there was no union involved. I guess my first exposure was when I took that job after I came out of the university, and I came....they told me there was a union there. It was voluntary; you pay your dues. And I wanted to get an idea about it because the dues I remember was like three dollars a month, or something like that. That was quite a little bit out of such a small....every two weeks, fifty-eight dollars, you know. And so I came home and started asking different people did they know about unions. And they said: "Well, they all right." It wasn't positive; it wasn't negative.. But they'll get you a raise, or something of that kind. Never nothing about simple representation. And so I felt, well look, they're the ones who get the raise, and I really am duty bound to pay my dues, which I did.

INTERVIEWER: When you got married, and you said there wasn't enough money and both of you expected that you would keep working, did you expect that you would work your whole life? I mean, was that your sense, that this would be something that you would do, or did you think that you would stop when you had kids?

ROBERTS: I could never think of stopping work, because I could never see him being in a position to really take care of the household. And I had been denied so many things as a child that I wanted more than just what I was....had, which was nothing. And so I just knew that I had to work. It was just part of my life.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think it was a common experience in the community, that people felt that way about working?

ROBERTS: There was two experiences, one, a person desperate to work. And the other one, those who had given up and went on to welfare, and that was going to be perpetrated through their kids as well as themselves, where their kids get pregnant, and they on welfare and the whole vicious circle. I had chose. That's the last thing I wanted was welfare.

INTERVIEWER: I'm just....the reason I ask is that one of the things that's interesting is that in the fifties in particular a lot of the

INTERVIEWER: stuff that's been written about women suggests that in the fifties, you know, there's just sort of all this ideological pressure to go back and not work. You can see it side by side with this incredible statistical expansion of the number of women in the work force. I've always thought it was something that affected basically middle-class women, but that for working-class women it was a sense that you just had to because you couldn't make it any other way.

ROBERTS: Yeah, and I think that they were sort of facing this, because the kind of work that they could get was domestic. So, nobody really know where they work and what they did. That kind of thing, you know, that was the market.

INTERVIEWER: So you think that....what I was curious about was, did people feel bad about having to work? I mean, did they feel that somehow women should stay home or was there really a sense that you just had to do that.

ROBERTS: No. They was excited about getting a job. Because it meant survival. I mean it was a whole different thing.

INTERVIEWER: OK. That was for background, I just wanted to catch up. I wanted to ask a few more questions about working, and the job and stuff. When you went to work in Lying-In Hospital, did you have any problems trying to expand what you were doing in terms of what your duties were, or were they pretty good about teaching you new things?

ROBERTS: Well, again there was no training program. I just worked very closely with this Mrs. Montich. And I started out, well I guess they assumed that I had some basic intelligence. I had just come out of school, you know. I'm sure the standards for somebody white was much lower than what was expected of me. And I suddenly realized, as I pointed out, that I was the only black nurse's aide. And she would tell me what she wanted me to do.

Once I got on to what it was that was expected of me, then I would even elaborate on that. Such as the cleaning, keeping the nursery very clean and mopping, but all the things that were clean around there was important that a nursing personnel do it because they would know the techniques so that you wouldn't contaminate the field....babies wouldn't be exposed to it.

And so I kept the linen closets and the cupboards and everything. As soon as we had a little light, you know, not as much babies, I would rush around and do that basic kind of

ROBERTS: cleaning to make sure that it was kept, you know, very clean. And I think she was relieved that she didn't have to follow behind me to tell me what to do. And I also helped feed the babies and things like that; saw that the formula was warm, and then went out and take 'em out to their mothers--this kind of thing.

INTERVIEWER: Did they let you sit in on shift report?

ROBERTS: No. They never dignify you with that, you know.

INTERVIEWER: Right.

ROBERTS: At all.

INTERVIEWER: It's still true.

ROBERTS: I would be able to notice on the name plate of the youngsters, sometimes notes was placed on there. Because maybe that was a child with a rash and had to have it treated a couple times a day. They may put it on there. They don't have the kind of charting that they have for a mother. So it was pretty easy for me after I begin to ask so many questions, I could read all the signs and identify things myself. Such as I could identify a child with a thrush, frequently a mongolian idiot or a child that was acting a little different, very blue or something like that. I would then proceed to pull them out first when I checked, so that when the doctor came in I could tell him. Because you had mostly interns checking babies. You assume babies are well. And they aren't always well. And so I wanted to be sure that he had a good look and would notice babies whose eyes had discharge, you know, things of that kind should be treated. And if you clean it off the doctor wouldn't see it, then it goes untreated. So . . .

INTERVIEWER: Do you think the nurses, other than the one in particular that you worked with, had any trouble with your attempting to learn more stuff? I mean, were they threatened by that, do you think, at all?

ROBERTS: In a way I did it, knowing that they would be. Somehow I had that kind of innate intelligence. And so, I would first find out their personality and then begin to move and do what I thought, you know, would be a decent mix of personalities so that I could get a benefit out of it.

I think doctors--you can't say anything to them--most of them do not want to share anything with you. But certain nurses would. I had one who was a very, uh, rigid. I knew that.

ROBERTS: And she felt that she had to be driving all the time, which I resented, because I didn't feel that I needed that. Anybody with intelligence knows what the job is, and there's got to be something wrong with them if they got to be told that job every day. And, but she wasn't going to last too long, so uh, she was there temporarily, so I tolerated it.

Then I had another nurse. I had a very unpleasant experience with her. She liked me very much, because she was very unhappy at home, so she would come in very abusive some days. And that would be with myself and the patients. She'd have all the patients on the floor crying. She was just nasty to 'em. She was pregnant and she wound up having a mongolian idiot, so I don't know what the chemistry of that was. But she was a very dear person to me after I went down and reported her because I didn't understand why she was so abusive. She just was downright nasty, you know. And when they investigated my complaint, you know, they called her outside. They talked to her. Because everybody was complaining how the patients was crying, you know. No reason. If a mother wanted something, she would just be nasty because she had the right to be nasty. She was in charge, and it made it very difficult. But she was having problems with her husband, and she was just having so many problems. She couldn't handle the fact that....she later tried to commit suicide, so she really was a very sick woman to be placed in that position. And then I began to understand her more, so I didn't pay too much attention other than to appease her while she was there. This was one of the most exclusive floors in the hospital. To have somebody like that give a very unpleasant experience to the mothers wasn't very good. But she didn't last too long, either.

INTERVIEWER: Did you get bored a lot with the job?

ROBERTS: When I felt that I was, and felt that I had learned as much as I could, I began to wait for openings in other areas that was more challenging for me. And then I would request a transfer. And I had more seniority than most young ladies, and so I moved in there. I moved into the emergency room. I thought that was quite a challenge, to be working under that kind of pressure. When the mothers would come in, some of them aborted, some of them were having a baby because they waited too long, all kinds of things dealing with the female. And to be able to comfort them and to work with the doctor was another challenge. Because babies don't talk back, but you know, the parent--I mean the mothers--did, and so you have to calm them down, because the doctors can be kind of rude. So you got to be the buffer between the doctor and the patient.

And then I went on to the operating room and that was my last assignment. But I could work the whole place, you know, because I had gotten familiar with all this.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think there were pressures on you that kept you from giving the kind of patient care you would have liked to have given? What do you think were the pressures?

ROBERTS: Well, that was a very good hospital. I was most fortunate. That's why I get so angry hearing about these. That was a very good hospital. Just one time when I really got involved in the union there was pressures that made me feel that way. That was when ten of the nurse's aides had left. And because I had the ability to work in many places, I was being exploited--myself and a few others who had the skills to walk into a situation and get it in order. And we was very proud of our work. Because once I would do something, I would want to not be questioned. I mean, if I had to prepare instruments for an operation, I would do that very thoroughly. And when you got a pack with my name on it, you know it was in order. And if I went downstairs and I was given a corridor of patients to ready, you know, to clean up for the day, they would all be very comfortable and clean by the time their business was done. And because I felt that way, to make sure that they were happy and that they had their bath and their beds were changed, they exploited that. I know I went though a period of almost a year where I was being exploited. It was very hard on me. And I had been there for ten years. That's what was my first grievance, and that really got me involved in the union.

INTERVIEWER: When you described what you did at Lying-In, even in the beginning, you did, it sounded much more, direct patient care than at the Catholic hospital. Was there a reason for the change?

ROBERTS: Yes, when I started at the Catholic hospital, I was, I put my age up. I think it was supposed to be sixteen; I was fifteen. And I was in the sort of kitchen. I was working in the kitchen washing dishes and helping to put food on the trays, you know, and things of that kind. And then the sister there recognized that I had more to offer than that, and she suggested that I become a nurse's aide. Their nurse's aide duties were quite different, because the sisters do a lot of work in the hospital. I think they have to as part of their order. And, therefore, there wasn't too many nursing duties to do. I guess it was passing the water, making the beds, making up packs for the next day, so that when the linens were changed, you know, everything would be there. You just drop off one in every room, that kind of thing. Taking flowers in that would come up, you know, things of that kind that was more supportive of the nursing role, rather than a sharing.

INTERVIEWER: I just wanted to ask some general questions about working conditions. When you were in Lying-In how many hours was the shift? How many hours did you work every day?

ROBERTS: I worked eight hours a day.

INTERVIEWER: Was that common? Were there three eight-hour shifts in the hospital?

ROBERTS: Yes, uh-huh.

INTERVIEWER: Were there ever....I've seen descriptions in the period that you were working in of split shifts, especially for nurses, where they could work for four or six hours, leave for a couple hours, and then come back and finish the shift. Did you see . . .

ROBERTS: There was some of that, in different parts of the hospital. There was a lot more of that, but I had just come and they sort of discontinued it.

INTERVIEWER: Did you get a permanent time shift or did they float you?

ROBERTS: They hired me for days. And I worked it. And then after I was there about five years, they wanted to have more of a rotating shift, and I objected to that, because I had been hired for days and that's what I wanted. So I really never worked the evening shift.

INTERVIEWER: Did other people, though, have to get floated?

ROBERTS: Eventually they did, yes. And then I sort of looked for areas where I did not have to do that. I wanted also a normal life in addition to my job, because I thought I would do better on the job if I felt like when I went I was satisfied, and when I went home I could also meet some of those responsibilities that's required at home. That was a strong feeling on my part, and yet I didn't want to leave that job.

INTERVIEWER: Did the nursing staff, as opposed to the aides, have to rotate more?

ROBERTS: Yes, no, what they really tried to do was hire people for specific shifts. And then you might have to relieve on a shift. But you didn't do that much rotating.

INTERVIEWER: Did they do much floating of people from floor to floor in the hospital, if it was more crowded in one place?

ROBERTS: Yes, they did. If, if there was a quite a bit of absenteeism, they would float you.

INTERVIEWER: How did people feel about being floated?

ROBERTS: They didn't like that and we finally, through negotiations, got an extra bonus for those who floated. I felt that it required flexible skills and that the person should be rewarded for it, and they would take it a lot more like....being an expert than being a punishment.

INTERVIEWER: Did people see it as a punishment?

ROBERTS: Yes, they did.

INTERVIEWER: Who got to choose who floated?

ROBERTS: Well, they just arbitrarily would move you around. I think it was probably done by the senior person maintaining the floor. But frequently, even that person would be moved.

INTERVIEWER: You talked a bit earlier about there being nursing students in the hospital. What was, do you remember how many nursing students there were as opposed to how many graduate nurses there were? Did they use nursing students a lot? Instead of graduate nurses?

ROBERTS: During the war they did, but they didn't get a great deal of them. And they were heavily concentrated to be used more on the weekends. So the nurses got more weekends than the other staff, because they could utilize them. But, I mentioned also that, they were sort of under my direction on weekends, and I would have to show them certain things, because they had never been in a nursery. Here they are, never been on my floor. And I would have to do it with a little bit of smarts, because they didn't want an aide telling them what to do. And so we worked it out all right. Most of the time they were very grateful for any suggestions that I would make showing them what we do, and so on. I would do all the supportive stuff during that period and let them do most of the nursing stuff, after I had taken 'em out with the babies, so that they didn't share any of the things that they thought might be beneath them. A good nurse works right along with the aide, and they do things together. And that way she can see that they're doing properly and also she teaches the aide, makes the job a little more exciting. I'm sure that the attendance is much higher when you have that combination.

INTERVIEWER: Did you....you mention working on weekends. What were the days that you worked? Was it a standard days that you worked or did you . . .

ROBERTS: I worked about five and a half days a week.

INTERVIEWER: Did that change, which five and a half days?

ROBERTS: Yes, it did. I started then having a half a day in the middle of the week, and maybe I'd have Monday off and so on. I didn't always have Sunday, you know. I would have it probably about once a month, or once every other week.

INTERVIEWER: How did you feel about that? Did it disrupt your life?

ROBERTS: It did, in a way. Because it wasn't that normal. That was the time that my husband was off, and so we didn't get to do too many things.

INTERVIEWER: But was it people's sense that was one of the things that you had to put up with when you worked in a hospital, because it had to be covered twenty-four hours a day?

ROBERTS: Well, I wasn't thinking too much. When I was there I did my job and all, but I was hoping that, you know, it was something I loved, because I loved people. But on the other hand, the hours didn't permit you to have the kind of life that most people have. And it's the price you got to pay.

INTERVIEWER: So you felt that that was the way the work was structured.

ROBERTS: Yes. I was going to stay in that setting or not, or move in that setting and find a job where you'd have weekends off. And eventually I did. The operating room provided that. That was one solution to it.

INTERVIEWER: You said that you got fifty-eight dollars every two weeks when you first started. Do you remember how much it went up to by the time you left?

ROBERTS: It probably was about $108.00.

INTERVIEWER: That would be thirteen years later. And do you think there was a pay differential between the white aides and the black aides?

ROBERTS: No, there wasn't. The union, I think, would not have stood for that. By then, you know, black aides were coming aboard, and there was no distinctions, to my knowledge.

INTERVIEWER: Were there orderlies in the hospital, too?

ROBERTS: Oh yes, there was one orderly. He worked in the operating room bringing the patients up who had to have caesarean sections or had operations of some kind.

INTERVIEWER: When did the hospital start hiring other black women to work as aides, do you remember?

ROBERTS: Well, I would think about six months, a year after I was there.

INTERVIEWER: Do you have any idea why it changed?

ROBERTS: I think it had to do with the progressive nursing director. She was from New York, and she didn't know why they didn't have any. Although when I came to New York it was a different story, but at any rate she was a very decent woman. In her own way she had some problems of her own in that....she and I really had some fights but, I think when you really presented her with the facts that she was smart enough to know that they were there, and she would have her own way of apologizing, just by being nice.

INTERVIEWER: Let's start again. I think I asked you whether or not the other aides felt the same way about work that you did.

ROBERTS: I think they did. In the main they were very excited about their job.

INTERVIEWER: Then you went on to talk a little bit about what you did with people who didn't . . .

ROBERTS: Well, there probably was always two or three people who were.... just wanted to use the job. And we was, I don't know whether we was straight-laced or what, but we was kind of dedicated to the job. And we was embarrassed by people who didn't come to work, because they'd leave us running all over the place. So we had our own way of discipline. And that was, surely sooner or later the nursing supervisor would bring 'em up on charges. And I would go in and make a plea for them, and I would talk to them afterwards very strongly. And then she would call me in again with them; I'd go in and make a second plea for them and talk to them again very strongly. In the meantime, all the other young ladies knew that this person was a lemon. And then the third time, I'd go in and I'd say, "Well, I really don't know what we can do about it." And then, of course, she would fire them, and then I would not make any appeals, and I would refuse to let our mechanism be used for an appeal for a person who obviously didn't want the job. And that way we kept very good people there. And everybody knew what was going on, and they didn't like anyone who abused it, because it meant that one of us would have to go and do their work in addition to trying to do our own. It was just abusing the core.

INTERVIEWER: I asked you also what you talked about during breaks and what you did during the breaks.

ROBERTS: Well, I learned to knit and crochet and all those things, because the immigrant population nurse's aides did a lot of that with their hands. We would talk about the job, some patients if something unusual happened. It was like a little gossiping town. Or somebody was getting married or something like that. We discussed those things. We didn't have much time, because we were pretty prompt about getting back up on the ward. And we only had a half an hour for lunch and probably a ten-minute break. Most of the time we didn't leave the floor for the break.

INTERVIEWER: I asked you what the patients were like and how they treated you.

ROBERTS: They were really marvelous. Very, very nice. There might have been one or two that was grouchy, but I think they would have been grouchy with anyone. But normally, I think it's the way you greet them, I was very secure in my own position, so when I entered the room I was always very cheerful and smiling, "Well hello there Mrs. uh, uh. Fine, how are you today? Did you see your baby? How does your baby look this morning?" Or something. And she might get all excited and tell me something about the baby, that their nipples were sore or something, and I said, "Well, I'll see that something is brought in for you." But they were very, very nice. In fact, they kept our nurses full of candy because they were so appreciative, you know. So we was pretty fat around there, you know. But they were nice people.

INTERVIEWER: Did you have more contact with the patients than the nurses, do you think?

ROBERTS: Perhaps yes. Because I would have to....we would have to pass out medication for nipples and things like that. And I had to proceed them sometimes in passing out things to all of the patients. So I wasn't just confined to one quarter. Although I would have a quarter which I was responsible for, a portion of it where I would take the baby out to the mother. But I would also, you know, help them go around and see all of them, and get reports from them, or something like that.

INTERVIEWER: Did you get to take care of the same patients a couple of days at a time, or did they float you all over the floor itself?

ROBERTS: Most of the time I floated all over the floor, because I would fill in wherever they needed somebody.

INTERVIEWER: How many patients....do you remember how many rooms there were?

ROBERTS: Yes. There was about forty-two. I know because when you walk those corridors, you know, you well know what's going on.

INTERVIEWER: Forty-two rooms or forty-two patients?

ROBERTS: Forty-two rooms. There was probably more patients, because some of them were double rooms. But not too many were double.

INTERVIEWER: So it was mostly private patients.

ROBERTS: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: Was there a ward in the hospital, too?

ROBERTS: Down on the second floor there was. The floor in which I worked was supposed to be sort of exclusive, all private patients. You know, they had private doctors. There was some semi-private rooms, but not many.

INTERVIEWER: Would you be responsible for half the floor? Or did you have to do all forty-two rooms?

ROBERTS: Well, at one time there was just Mrs. Montich and I. And that was really murder, because you had to get 'em out and back in, and we had a schedule time for feeding. And everybody would start crying at the same time, and you were really, you know, hacking it. But when you get there you just give her the baby, because you already had it bundled up for her, so....it would be tough. Then there was some where the mothers didn't feel well, and during the time that the mothers were feeding the babies you had to feed them in the nursery.

INTERVIEWER: Did you have much of a relationship to the hospital administration itself? Did you ever see them, or was it mostly only through the nursing structure that you dealt with them?

ROBERTS: When I became shop steward I would see the nursing director. Occasionally, only when I had a grievance, but I didn't have that much relationship.

INTERVIEWER: So was it your sense that basically the nurses on the floor sort of organized things and ran things, and if you had problems, they were the problem, not . . .

ROBERTS: That's right.

INTERVIEWER: Not some administrative . . .

ROBERTS: That's right. That's the way that I saw it.

INTERVIEWER: Was it true, do you think, in the hospital in general that each floor ran differently and kind of had its own separate policies and procedures and ways of doing things? Or was there more uniformity throughout the hospital?

ROBERTS: It was quite a bit of uniformity. And then the floors would differ in the kind of patient that they would have. We would have one floor that was for gynecological problems. And that was quite different because that was all operations, you know. But the nursery floors were quite similar.

INTERVIEWER: What do you think was the worst thing about your job?

ROBERTS: I think the lack of....I think the thing that bothered me was the lack of opportunity to move upward if you were really interested in the job. I felt, number one, that society had failed me in that I didn't have an opportunity in spite of the fact that I really wanted to. And then, here I was working in a subordinate role, sort of being teased by professionals, which I thought I would like because I liked people so well. And regardless to how good I was in that role, I would never get the opportunity to fulfill my dream to be a nurse--in spite of the fact that they did not have enough nurses. They were very, very short of nurses during that time.

INTERVIEWER: When they were short of nurses would they hire more aides rather than hire more nurses?

ROBERTS: Yes, they did. And you might have one or two nurses and the rest of the area was filled by aides making the beds and all. The nurses would pass out the medication. It's almost the same as now, though where you would have the patient know the aides better than they know the nurse. The nurse won't even talk to them by intercom, other than to come into the room--anything to keep from getting off the seat and going into the room.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think the nurses preferred that or do you think that they were unhappy about it--sitting in the nursing station?

ROBERTS: I think there's a mixed group, that you have some that would rather be at the bedside and who are superb, and you have others who would rather be administrators.

INTERVIEWER: What do you think is the best thing about the job?

ROBERTS: I think just being around people and making them, seeing them smile and be happy about something you was doing, or seeing them relieved because you had made it a little easier for 'em. It gave me a sense of satisfaction.

INTERVIEWER: What was your sense other than the sense of mobility about what the major problems were about your job?

ROBERTS: Well, I thought that we didn't have enough formalized education. It was nice for me to learn in the nursery because I would ask, and to learn wherever I would go. But the way you do certain things is very important to a nonprofessional person who should continue to take the long way because it has meaning, rather than to short cut because they don't know why....you take the long way, if you understand what I'm trying to say.

INTERVIEWER: Yes.

ROBERTS: And I thought we should have had a lot more formal education and a lot more excitement brought to the job and be part of the team, which means that you should be there when reports are given about a patient. If a patient isn't supposed to get water because they're going up to surgery the next day, tell me that. Don't let me see that it may be on the door, it may be on the bed, or somebody might have forgotten to do it. I should be as responsible for seeing that that occurs where the patient is concerned as the nurse is. Because chances are I'm going to be in that room a lot more frequent than a nurse. And a patient will try you; they'll ask you, you see.

Also it's helpful when you take out trays. Frequently, the diet changes; the doctor will change the diet. And nobody told the person in the kitchen. So everybody who takes a tray into a patient ought to be aware of what's going on. So I think more attention ought to be paid. I think there should be seminars given where every year, if there's any new changes going to come on the floor--because medicine is always in change--that you have all the subordinate staff in, including housekeeping people. They should be part of a team that helps a patient to recuperate. Because if you don't have a clean area for a patient, you know that, too, is very, very important. That patient's resistance is very low when they are a patient. And everything around them must be kept in such a way that it does not endanger them.

But somehow....we haven't learned to give people dignity in their work, regardless of what they do. And because we haven't learned that, we don't get the most out of them. All you're saying is that you are a human being and what you do is very

ROBERTS: important, is part of a team, and it's not taking a doggone thing away from you--it's enhancing you, and making them so proud of themselves that they're cleaner and they are more attentive to the job. Because it has more meaning to them.

INTERVIEWER: Did you ever try to....did you ever ask to sit in on a shift report and to get that kind of information or to be given the charts?

ROBERTS: No. It was pretty hard to do that, because if....here everybody's crowding around the desk and you come up there, they ask you: "What do you want?" You know, like, "Who are you?" I mean, that's the way it was. And I always, and today, I still feel that way. There's something very small about and something very insecure about people who claim to be educated, that feel so threatened by those who don't have the academic standing, who just simply want to learn how they can do more. I mean, when you examine it, you see how ridiculous it is.

INTERVIEWER: Did the other aides feel the same way? I mean, is it one of the things you used to talk about?

ROBERTS: No. You see, I guess everybody have their own way of, seeing things in their own mind. If they are not there, and probably just accept it the way it is, who are you to make such drastic changes? And I was just coming into the labor movement. There was so many things that was important: they used to have shifts to schedule the employees, maybe nine o-clock one day, eight o'clock, maybe noon, maybe evening. They had a cadre of people that they would do that to. And they didn't know how disruptive that was in their life. They had their kids, and babysitter problems, and all kinds of things. And they would proceed to probably bring them up on charges and fire them, so I had to establish that if it was necessary that they scheduled them to do this, then they have to be responsible for paying the babysitters and all the other problems that went along with it. And that would be true of those employees who were there and those that they would hire to replace them, regardless. So finally we got that over to them, but we had so many other.... we didn't have health insurance at the time--so many different things that we needed that that was not a high priority. It became one when I came here. But these were some of the things that we were struggling with.

INTERVIEWER: How do you think you started to feel about how you could make changes in the hospital?

ROBERTS: Well, because I identify, of course, with hospital workers very much, and I know the feeling. And I felt that we shared the same feeling, and in talking to them I knew we did. So then I thought it would be necessary to develop a program to try to do something about those things that we all have in common. That's for people who really care about being there. As a result, we did have and still have career development programs for the eighth year in New York. And those programs have been so successful, some of the best programs in the country. Growing out of the sixties in the manpower programs was part of the health thing.

INTERVIEWER: But when you were working in the hospital in Chicago, did you have a sense....what was your sense about the way you would make solutions to the problems you were having on the job?

ROBERTS: Well, I would have to do a lot of investigation. I can just remember that when I was trying to make a case on these sporadic change of hours, to meet with the institution any time anybody wanted to experiment with something they would change the work hours. And it fell on the junior person. And when I tried to make the case with the nursing supervisor, she said: "Oh, that's not true. That doesn't happen." And she screamed. So I got all of the time sheets, and I took them to her bosses and showed that this was a regular scheduled thing, with no regard for the worker. And they were sort of surprised at her. And of course they made some amends for it. When I went to her for help when ten nurse's aides had left, and we had tried to carry it for a year, and it was just murderous for us--that was a fifth of the workforce that had left. We still had the same number of patients and everything. She says, "Oh, you know, there's only been a few to leave and she's not gonna hire anybody." She started screaming at me. And then I came out with the names of people, when they left, and what impact it had on us. And, of course, she had to get the ten people. But I started knowing that obviously anything I said wouldn't carry any weight with her, unless I had the ability to make a case.

INTERVIEWER: I'm curious about even earlier than that, about when you first started to feel that there were problems on the job and that things had to be done about it. Did you think that the union was going to be the solution? Or did you think that there were other ways to go about making change?

ROBERTS: Oh, yes. I thought it should be. And what I did was I went to the shop steward who had been there a long time. And to her the union was just picking up the dues and, you know, "don't

ROBERTS: rock the boat." And it was at that time that we were working these long, different jobs during the course of a day, and ten people were missing, that I brought it to her. She did nothing. So I called the union office, and I said: "Look, we been paying our dues for years now," and I said, "We need the union. We don't have help here, and it's killing all of us. And the best people are going to have to quit." "And," I said, "So what's the union going to do about it?"

So I called them very angry, because I was so annoyed with her. She was a symbol of the union and she wasn't functioning, as far as I was concerned. She said, "It wasn't in the contract." I said, "But we're being overworked." They said, "Yes, that's an overwork grievance." Over workload. I said, "Well, who's going to handle it?" They said, "Well, you'll have to get a steward elected, then if you don't want her,"--which was not a good answer for us--"handle it yourself."

So then I came back, and I told the girls what was said, so they said, "Well, let's get rid of her. Let's get another steward, and you be it." I says, "No, I don't want to be it." You know. And they said, "Well, you have to. Either we quit or we stand up and fight."

And so then I decided and went home and told my husband, "If I'm going to take this stewardship, then I've got to go to meetings, because I really have to know what I'm doing. I'm going up against some heavies," you know. So he said, "All right. Go ahead and take it." I told him how many meetings it involved--one or two a month.

INTERVIEWER: Was he in a union himself?

ROBERTS: No.

INTERVIEWER: Then how did he feel about unions? Do you know?

ROBERTS: He really didn't want me to get involved. But I told him I had to. It was either that or quit, which meant the rent wasn't going to be paid.

So then I started. I got the contract book, and I heard what the woman had told me about....it was an over workload grievance. And I began to document the people who had left and what we were doing. And then I asked her--the election was held, and I won the election--so then I asked the ex-shop steward, who

ROBERTS: was also the secretary, if she'd be kind enough to introduce me in my new role. And then I had to do all these things. I really didn't get that much leadership. And so she did. She took me, and she introduced me. And then I pull out my little contract book, and I told them that I was there on behalf of all the young ladies who worked at Lying-In Hospital; that we enjoyed working there very much, but we felt we had been exploited and that ten people had left and they had not replaced them. And we certainly didn't mind working when there was an emergency of any kind, but we felt that to be scheduled every day to do three people's jobs was just too much; and that the better employees were really being exploited and was really on the verge of collapse.

And she screamed at me and told me that no ten had left, and who was I to come into her office telling her. And I told her I was the shop steward. And I don't know what she was accustomed to, but she and I was going to have a very different relationship. Because by then it was either fight or quit. So I gave her a contract book. I said, "Here's a contract book. Our union and the university has felt that these were the fair rules--name of the game. And I'm going to go according to them, and I hope that you're going to do the same." I said, "You have five days in order to respond to my grievance." And I listed the names of the people and when they had left and how we had struggled with her, but that now it was time for some changes. And she started screaming and yelling. And then I got up and told her she had the grievance, and I'd see her in five days. And I left. And she was so outraged that she beat up on the secretaries. I told you she had some problems. They hated for me to come down because they knew that she was going to get the devil.

And then she called for me the next day. And so, I was off. So she went up to my supervisor and wanted to know what kind of worker I was, because she wanted to fire me. And she said, "You can't do that. She's the best worker we have. I don't have any reason--nothing to bring her up on charges for." So she said, "When she comes tomorrow, you have her come downstairs."

So when I came in, I went downstairs. So she said, "I want you to apologize." And I told her I was not apologizing. I had nothing to apologize for. I said, "Either you hire the people," I said, "Look, you've got three days to do it. Or I am going to appeal it. That's all. There's nothing to argue about." And so I left her again with her mouth open. And she hung around very upset. But at the end of the five

ROBERTS: days, she brought ten girls up and introduced them to us. And I was really--that was--I was on my way, you know. And I didn't gloat about it or anything, 'cause I realized that that was not the thing to do.

That end of the day, I went down and thanked her very much for having, you know, come to some conclusion where she knew that we needed more help. And I was hoping that that would be the start of a relationship where we could correct a lot of injustices for the workers. I says, "And I think if we can do that, you will have a better group working for you." And I left her like that, and she really didn't know what to make of me. She probably felt that because that grievance involved me as well as some of the others was that the union was very personal to me. In fact, she said it. But as I proceeded resolving problems for others that had nothing to do with me, then she finally told me that she really was very respectful of me. And she later went on to die, but she always sent for me to come over and see her and talk to her, because she wanted to make sure everything was all right with us. It was a real strange feeling, you know?

INTERVIEWER: What level workers were in the union at the time?

ROBERTS: Every employee. Every nonprofessional employee had the right to join. We didn't get check-off till about five years after I was there.

INTERVIEWER: But it wasn't the nurses. The nurses weren't in the same . . .

ROBERTS: No, the nurses was not.

INTERVIEWER: Because AFSCME organized nurses in other places, I know.

ROBERTS: The nurses and the doctors was not, but everyone else had the right to belong. And the engineering staff was not part of it.

INTERVIEWER: Were there many other women active in the union when you got involved?

ROBERTS: Yes. Mostly women, because the hospital has more women. There was a woman president of the local.

INTERVIEWER: Were there other women organizers that you knew that worked for the union?

ROBERTS: Yes, there was the person who organized the union, who aided it, was a woman. And her name was, I think, Steffie Pep. And then there was another woman named Bernie Fisher who also was very active in getting that union started.

INTERVIEWER: And were there many other blacks in the union at the time, too?

ROBERTS: No. Very few. Very few.

INTERVIEWER: When were the meetings that you had to go to? Were they in the evenings mostly?

ROBERTS: They were in the evenings.

INTERVIEWER: And were they at the hospital or were they at the union hall?

ROBERTS: No, there was a little place that we rented out for the meetings.

INTERVIEWER: Was that a problem for you? Was it a problem to get other women out?

ROBERTS: Well, at that time being a woman and growing up that way, I felt that, you know, any time I took away from home was like I wasn't there to get supper, or something. I learned how to leave leftovers behind. That was, I think, my husband's major concern, because he worked pretty hard. And so it was not a problem, and that soon he adjusted to the fact that I just wouldn't be home that evening. Sometimes I would run home and fix something and then go.

INTERVIEWER: How often were the meetings?

ROBERTS: About twice a month there would be a meeting.

INTERVIEWER: Was it hard to get other women to come to the meetings, too?

ROBERTS: Well, after I started getting active, I started thinking of ways and means to get 'em out. Something exciting to tell 'em, you know. Report on negotiations. Report on grievances and all. And then they would get a feel that the union was on the move and making changes. And they were very anxious to come to see what was going on.

INTERVIEWER: Did you put out a newsletter in the hospital, too?

ROBERTS: Yes. We had a flyer which was newsworthy. It was put out once a month. It also carried a meeting notice.

INTERVIEWER: How do you think the other workers felt about the union?

ROBERTS: Well, it took a long time. First, being shop steward, then secretary, then representative. It took a long time to get them excited about the union, because they hadn't had that kind of work done before. The people from downtown waited to be called. I was a little different. I would go into the

ROBERTS: dining rooms and sit down and talk to the different workers. In fact, they tried to put me out a couple of times, because I would just sit at the table with a group and tell them I was from the union. And it was always pretty negative for awhile, until they got to know that I was there. And then, it was a sense of security for them. And they would just greet me, and everybody knew that here I was. I was around, you know.

INTERVIEWER: How did you know to do that?

ROBERTS: I didn't. I just, I felt that my feeling was that the union wasn't around or anything. That, that shouldn't happen. If I'm going to be the representative, I didn't want to be guilty of those things that I didn't like when I was coming on. And so I would go out. And I knew that if the union ever was to be strong, and I ever was to gain things for them, I needed their support. And the only way to get it was to let them understand that the union was a organ for that. And I would always give them a quick education about what the union was trying to do and what we needed--that we needed them with us to accomplish it.

And I began to get some pretty big increases for them as a result of being on the negotiating team. Of course, Vic Gotbaum was there at that time, and it was very interesting watching him. He was different, you know, from the other representatives that I had watched. And so I learned a great deal from him.

INTERVIEWER: How was he different?

ROBERTS: Well, he was more aggressive. And he had his facts and what-not, you know. He would really go after management. They were accustomed to having real neat, clean glove fights. Those days were over, you see. I really was happy about that. He didn't visit the campus too much. He did at first, until I came. And, of course, people were kind of shy. You know, he didn't reach out. Most of them then was turning back, and so, but I reached out. I would go into every little corner. I'd go over in the smelly labs, across campus, I'd walk, you know, and see them. And I had certain scheduled time that I would do that, sign up people who didn't belong, and talk to them about the union, and take up their problems. To the point that I had a lot of problems coming, because the more active the union is, the more people then want you to relieve them of injustices that they have been living with for a long time.

I was anxious to take those things on, and I guess I was pretty effective. Management wondered why they never promoted me, to get me out of the union, you see. But it worked out. And it was a very good experience, a growing experience for me, probably one of the most essential experiences in teaching me, you know, what to do, how to do it, and when to do it.

INTERVIEWER: Could you just tell me what union positions you held in what order?

ROBERTS: First I was a shop steward. And then I went on to be elected a secretary of that local union. And then I was taken out as a representative and organizer for that local. And then I had other locals and they were white hospital workers in mental institutions migrating from the southern part of Illinois. I had to organize them and help them. That was a very challenging experience. But then I went on to AFSCME International Union staff and ordered to handle their problems. And then back to the Council staff as a result of some political problems in the union. And then later I was brought here [New York City] as the head of a division--the hospital division. And then, about three years later I was promoted to this position.

INTERVIEWER: How did you first become an organizer from having been a steward? I mean, how did that happen?

ROBERTS: Well, Vic Gottbaum came in during the time I was a steward and noticed that I was aggressive, that I was responsible. I would....when I would talk to him about a grievance, I would tell him what I thought we ought to do. And then, you know, he would tell me whether it needed to be changed. Then I start bothering him and saying we need to be educated because this is a very responsible position, and you're going to represent people--it's like being a lawyer--you got to know the rules of the game. And I hounded him, and so he had to look for....Roosevelt University had an educational program, so he put me into that program, and then he noticed that I....guess I had something to offer. So he asked me to come out and work for the union. He really was the person who gave me my start.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think it was harder getting women involved in the union than men?

ROBERTS: Women was pretty involved. I think they were more involved in the union, because when I got into strikes and fights, they were really there. But they felt their role should be more, played down a bit because they wanted the men to surface. Maybe it had to do with the strength that is supposed to be brought to the table or something. But they was willing to take a lot of subordinate roles.

INTERVIEWER: How did you feel about that?

ROBERTS: I didn't think too much about it, because we had a president and she was very passive, and what have you. And I think that they needed more or less to see that....see, I was always....

ROBERTS: I always felt that if I had a job to do, it transcends whether I was male or female; I had to do the job. I never thought about not doing the job, and not being aggressive. But I also wanted to be feminine, a woman, at the same time. And I think the name of the game is not to try to mimic a man, just be yourself. And I was always just myself, fighting for what I thought was right. And each time I won, I grew stronger in my determination to continue to fight for what I thought was right. And then I think a lot of others, they are more willing to pick it up, but people, you know, think you're going to get into a battle, and you're going to get shot down. I was also very fortunate that I could talk to Vic, you know, when I was uptight. "You see, you're taking it too serious."

INTERVIEWER: You were talking about taking the job too seriously.

ROBERTS: Well, I guess I took it seriously 'cause I identified so much with the kind of thing that went on. I can recall that when I went on the first grievance alone representing workers, I went to the head, I guess the personnel director of the university who was quite different from the nursing director at the hospital. He was a very educated man, and he made no hesitation in letting me know that and talking down to me and trying to humiliate me, because he thought that was going to be a weapon in order to keep me from bothering him. And I just got very angry, and I said to him....for instance, if I made a grammatic mistake he would point it out to me while I was talking to him. And if I went in and had on pink or yellow, he said: "You people like those colors, don't you?" Very insulting to me always, you know. And I would say, "Well, I didn't come to talk about me. I came to give you a grievance," I says, and "You're going to have ten days to respond to it." So I would give it to him and talk to him about it.

It got to a point where that didn't work, so I had to write it. And he was so hung up on demoralizing me that I had about three grievances that I had taken to arbitration and won before he realized that he was a fool. I mean that's just some of the kind of racist insults that you get. They had told Vic that he should have never brought me out, that I was a little bit too angry, I don't know what, only because I was seeking what was right. No other reason. I was using the mechanism for doing that, and I was not afraid. And I think all those things was kind of frightful to them. And they had to get to know me a little bit.

And then after that they began to see that I was responsible, but I wanted them to be fair. And I was going to be tough if I had to do that in order to attain fairness. And so it worked out where we had quite a bit of respect for each other.

INTERVIEWER: Did you get support from people in the community for the union?

ROBERTS: No, at that time I was so busy just learning my own role that I did not call upon the people in the community. I think that when we was first organizing that the community was somewhat involved. But that was before I came out there to represent them.

INTERVIEWER: How do you think people felt about a hospital union at that time?

ROBERTS: Most of the talk was that hospitals don't need unions. And they played on the patients. You see, management frequently hide behind their product, hide behind, you know, the patients, in order to do injustices to the workers. And then they come out and say, "Well they struck these poor, sick people." And so nobody examines why the individuals strike. After all they paid a price, too. It isn't that they go out and come back with their pockets full of money. And they don't have their whole life interrupted and hostilities among themselves for those who strike and those who are forced out and then those who don't want to strike. It creates all kinds of turmoil. And so, obviously, a worker pays equally for a decision that they had made. And I think one of the biggest things that's difficult for them is the fact that even though you have democratic decisions, when you drag along the minority in a group of unsophisticated people, that's never quite accepted, you know. That's one of the biggest things: for them learning how to accept the majority's opinion in trying to make it work, because then it benefits all of them rather than trying to sabotage it.

INTERVIEWER: Did you end up, then, having to spend a lot of time talking to people about why the union was doing things the way it was, or why the union was important?

ROBERTS: Oh, yes. Communications was one of the biggest things in the world. I mean, once they understood, anything that, that we had decided to do, I would spend considerable time talking about it. Shortly after I came out, we started to organize other private hospitals. And it was necessary that we do so because we were not able to get increases beyond a cent and a half and three cents an hour. I mean, that was incredible. And the salaries for a hospital worker was so poor, and all they would say to us because we might have made a nickel more than some other hospital workers was, "Oh, you're doing fine. You're doing better than they are."

So we knew that the other hospitals had to be organized. And there was absolutely no law giving them the right to organize, so management could force the union out, because they would

ROBERTS: embrace each other, you see. And we had nothing going for us. So we did organize five hospitals of which two went out on strike. That was very difficult because these employees were making fifty-eight cents an hour, very small wages--male and female--and there were minorities. And the hospital would rather have closed than to have a union. We lost the strike after six months; we lost the strike. But the wages in that hospital tripled.

Some of the people....we were pretty smart--we sent them back before we called the strike off as if they were scabbing, because we knew they couldn't get other employment. And these were some of the older people. That's how unhappy they were. And they were marvelous.

INTERVIEWER: Did you have a hard time getting people to go out on the strike? I mean, was there general sentiment for it?

ROBERTS: No, not at all. It took us all of two months to organize them and 'em out on strike. That's how it happened, anyway. And they were models. The strike, losing the strike could mean bitterness for a union forever, or it could mean an education wherever people go where they look for a union. And so out of it we had people who were educated as to what the union was all about, and they wanted to work only in a union setting. And they were so well-educated by the end of that time that they got up making all kinds of beautiful speeches to Vic for being their leader and taking them out. You know, and saying, "even though we didn't win the war, but we won the battle," you see. Because the salaries were ludicrous all over the city.

INTERVIEWER: When you first got involved in the union did you think you'd ever have more of a leadership role than being a steward?

ROBERTS: No. I never dreamed of having more of a role.

INTERVIEWER: Did you think that being a woman made a difference? Or being a black woman made a difference?

ROBERTS: I think I met with a lot of prejudices, both being female and black. A lot of prejudices. In fact, I meet with them now. For what happens is, after....now I'm more exposed to people that know me, which makes it a little easier for me. I don't know if it'll make it easier for anyone else, you see, but it makes it easier for me, because I've sort of had to establish myself. I've been to the mat a lot of times. I call these demonstrations, strikes and whatnot, and being taken to the mat. But it was very difficult, very difficult.

INTERVIEWER: Did you ever feel that you were being discouraged from running for union office?

ROBERTS: This office that I had, the president appointed. And not really. I always tried to do a job for the rank and filers, and they are all the encouragement I need. And they encourage me all the time.

INTERVIEWER: Did you do much traveling for your job, once you were out of the hospital?

ROBERTS: Yes. When I was working, organizing the state employees, I had to drive ninety miles, a hundred miles and so on to service them. One local, I had to take a plane, and they would pay. And it was amazing, because these were locals that I was organizing. They were southern white. There were some blacks that they didn't permit in their union, until after they had accepted me, and then they did accept them.

So I had a lot of different kinds of experiences, you know, and all.

INTERVIEWER: What happened when you went to your first....I mean, did they know you were black before you went down?

ROBERTS: Yes they did. They knew I was a black woman. They called Vic every day telling him to take me out, they wouldn't join a union, that I was black, and people didn't respond to that. It was during the days of Martin Luther King when I got started in that, so the feeling was very high. And Vic never would tell me what they said, but I could feel this. And he went with me two or three times to pass leaflets, and then he didn't go anymore and I was left on my own.

INTERVIEWER: This was in the late fifties?

ROBERTS: Yes. And early sixties. And it was very hard. They looked at me as if I was something out of space. And I had to know my rules and regulations. I had to be tolerant and I had to show them that I really loved them. And it took a long time--it took eight months--and it was like overnight that it happened. I was just playing with them and I would go out there--they expected me once a week. And it got so I would make it a point of being on time, you know, and being there. And I started working on their problems that they had, and all I had was the state procedures. And I knew 'em well, so I was able to accomplish a lot of things. They knew nothing about workers' compensation; they were getting hurt by the patients regularly

ROBERTS: because they had violent patients. And I took a lawyer out there, and we filed a lot of cases. And we got money. And so they began to see that I was a help. And then they began to help me. And I have never had such a beautiful, loyal group of people as those. In fact, they had me then elected as vice-president of this union. They carried that campaign themselves.

But that was one of the real exciting things. And then they began to say that they had to have a checkerboard, executive board, to reflect everybody. And I had to go in the washroom at that time and just cry, you know? Because I knew then that I had gotten over to them.

And I used to service the black members, but I would go down and see them in a different section of town....and not say anything about what I was doing for their problems or anything, because they kept thinking that they would take over. That was a feeling of theirs. And even in meetings I would tell the blacks, "Don't try to monopolize my time. I will always come to the train station and see you, but I want to be able to talk to them and let them feel free, and you have to understand that we're in a process." And they understood very well. They were southerners, too.

And then before long we had a union function where blacks and whites came with a covered, we call it a covered pot. And each one of them brought a dish that they liked and that they could prepare best. So we had everything to eat, and we had an all-day family festival. And it was the most successful thing in that small town that ever happened.

And I was so happy. It was just a feeling that you couldn't imagine, you know, it became an annual thing. And I had been doing things for the patients. I had them keeping very busy, which they did. They had evenings where they would go out and entertain the patients, you know. Because it was a small town with nothing to do. And many of them lived on the grounds of the hospital and was becoming institutionalized, which was not healthy for them. So they were different workers than ordinary workers. And I had to always be thinking of ways and means to help them. It was therapeutic and, and get the best out of them, you know.

INTERVIEWER: Were there more men than women in that local, do you know? Do you remember what the . . .

ROBERTS: It was probably more women that was active, but there was more men in that setting than a normal hospital. And they were very protective of me. We got to the place, you know, when I left them, they went all the way to Washington. They was just outraged that I was leaving them.

And right today, you know, I know them. When I go and see them there's such a reunion we have. But they were really a challenge to me at a time when I was just coming on the scene. And I can remember Vic saying that I should have civil rights speakers there, and he was....'cause he knew what they were like. I said, I won't." I said, "Because they're not ready for that. That's not the kind of people you're going to talk into something. They have to get to know me, and then they'll feel like they accept the whole thing."

And sure enough, that's what happened. I used to leave there with a terrible headache; I was under such tension. And they were trying me all the time, asking me all kinds of questions like, "I want the union, but I don't know if I want it with you," and this kind of thing. And that wasn't being sad. I was just being tested. And I would go anywhere, anytime to handle their problems, and that began to spread throughout the state, and that's how I got this local that was 240 miles away. And they used to pay for my plane fare. And I used to go down there and beat upon the boss and take care of their problems and come back, and all they'd have to say is: "I'm going to call Ms. Roberts," you know. It was really marvelous, just marvelous, you know. And when I went into our convention where we have our new president, they played a very important part in getting him elected, because....out of respect for me. But it was really amazing what they did.

INTERVIEWER: Did you travel alone a lot then?

ROBERTS: I was always alone. It was more evenings that I wasn't home. I had to be at all their meetings, and I would go once a month to one of the homes, and I would have all the shop stewards there. And they did the organizing. And I would just brag about how many cards they had brought in and then we had....talk to them about programs. We had one program, a discount program where the merchants gave all of the members a ten percent or fifteen percent discount on anything that they bought. And I had a committee that would go around, and we'd get this from the merchants. And when we had our big family affair we had over 200 door prizes--blankets, everything, because every merchant contributed. And we had all the talent and things for the kids. People dressed up like Mama and Papa Bear, and balloons, and it was just, just marvelous. It was the greatest thing. It just turned out perfect.

ROBERTS: And some of them had said that they didn't want to come, because they didn't want to be dancing--they didn't want the niggers to dance with their wives, and things. So then the others told me. And I said, "That's all right. Let's not worry about that. We'll just have a good time." Well, they came, because it just started getting a momentum. And everybody worked out just beautifully. I had committees in case anybody got out of hand for both sides, to take care of business, you know. And I stayed the whole time. I was just dead.

So then when I would go down, they would want me to stay in their homes, you know. "Don't drive back tonight." They was worried about me all the time. And I said, "No, I'm all right. I have to get home, you know."

So I would. I permitted them to call any time there was a problem, so my phone was really busy.

INTERVIEWER: How did your husband feel about that?

ROBERTS: He didn't like it. I was being taken away by the members, and he didn't like that.

INTERVIEWER: Did you fight about it a lot, then?

ROBERTS: Well, it was really hard for me because I still would try to do the cooking and things like that. But I would be in the middle of a meal and the phone would ring or something like that. And I had to do that to build up the relationships that I needed, but he was never too happy about it. So we didn't fight too much. At the end we did, a lot. It became too much of a strain. I couldn't maintain fights with the bosses and concerns for the members, and fighting at home. It was too much for me. I couldn't take it.

INTERVIEWER: So, did you split up finally?

ROBERTS: Yes, we did. We separated after nineteen years of marriage, twenty years of marriage. And he just couldn't come around to it, and I felt that it was giving up my entire life. It was something I had always wanted to do, and that is to be of service to people. I was really exploring and doing, and just felt so good inside about many of the things that I was able to do. I couldn't see abandoning them, because in many ways the plight for workers is the plight for me as well, you see. If things get better for me, they got to get better for me, then they got to get better for everybody. And somebody had to do it, and I enjoyed doing it. And since I felt that I had to make a living that I wanted to do what I wanted to do.

INTERVIEWER: You never had children, right?

ROBERTS: No, no. I never . . .

INTERVIEWER: Did you have your sister's children by then?

ROBERTS: Yes. My sister's children came to me in '63, I think it was. I had them for....yeah, it was '63.

INTERVIEWER: And how old were they then?

ROBERTS: One was one years old. And then there was one that was five. And another one was six. And my mother came with them. And so she was a help.

INTERVIEWER: That was in '63. You were working for the Council then?

ROBERTS: Yes. I was still in Chicago.

INTERVIEWER: You came here [New York City] in '64, right?

ROBERTS: '65. My mother was doing the cooking by then and it was a big help, but he still was not really happy. The kind of recognition I was beginning to get and the kind of job I was doing was kind of a threat to him, and he just couldn't resist putting me down in front of people, because he felt that that made him look good. I put up with it and ignored it for a long time, until I felt like, "I don't need this. I don't need it anymore. I just can't take it."

He never understood it, you see. I think he does now, certainly....understand it. But I find that it's happening with women. I guess it happened to me back then, but it's happening to women now who wants fulfillment. Well, I wanted both fulfillment and I had to work. I had no choice. So it wasn't a luxury to me. But it was just the niche that I thought I needed to be in.

INTERVIEWER: I just had some questions about women in the local. When there were women who were active, did they sometimes stay active and then drop out, and did you try to figure out why they would drop out?

ROBERTS: No, no. They were marvelous. The ones that were active was very active, and they just hung right in there with me. The women and the men, you know, just right there. They almost was....felt protective about me, because I was doing so many aggressive things. They just kind of felt that way, and I tell you, I never had to worry about a thing.

INTERVIEWER: Did you feel that there was a lot of support in the union for what you were doing?

ROBERTS: I never did anything that I did not share with them before I did it. And I would explain to them why. I would suggest it and ask them did they feel there was another way, and could I get their support on it. Or if they brought up something at a meeting, we would talk it out and arrive at a decision. The decisions were not just mine. They were ours, so that that immediately gave me support.

INTERVIEWER: And did you think there was problems above you in terms of things that you wanted to do?

ROBERTS: Yes, there was. Because when we didn't have collective bargaining there was limited things that I could do. But I was able, because every time the man makes the rules, the laws and what have you, he makes them to get around you, you know, the people who....and he makes them so that he could play with you.

And I was able to force them to do things in a constructive way. And I would even go to court. I found a young lawyer who was very anxious at that time to get some work, and I had him to get himself involved in workman's compensation, because he got a percentage by law of whatever the settlements was. So he would do that. And then as a result of that I could talk to him about other things that I saw. I wanted to know if there was any other way of handling them. And he could tell me. Sometimes we even had to go to court. So I would see that the local paid, and we would go to court. We were able to win so many things that way. Take care of so many injustices.

I can remember when there was discrimination in housing, and the blacks would get the job and have no place to stay. Because in the small towns the whites, of course, were not going to let them stay in a hotel, and then they didn't have facilities on the grounds. And so it was....awful. And I can recall going to the administration and getting on them about this. I'm telling you, this was against the law. But I would do this alone, because I knew it would be a threat to the whites if they saw me aggressively fighting for an injustice for the blacks. And the next thing you'd know, they be letting the blacks come on, and they never would say anything because they were so happy that I wasn't out in front of their place making a big racial issue. I'd tell 'em this: that I'm coming and you're alone, because I don't want to get a race situation here in the hospital, but I'm not above breaking this thing open. So they would come across with some housing.

ROBERTS: And there was a time when they had training programs where you would move from psychiatric aide one, two, three and so on, and they would never let the blacks go to school. So I had them all to apply, everybody all to apply. And then I wanted to know why they didn't go. And what's the criteria for selecting them.

There was a time when the merit increases was given. And that was based on whether the supervisor liked you or not, and I hope to tell you that most of the blacks didn't get them. And then I wanted, I got everybody's evaluation records--because that's how they gave them [merit increases]--based on the evaluation. And for all those who had similar evaluations which was good, I wanted to know: "Well, how did you select out these over the others?" And when I finished working their game on them, they would almost give every union member an increase, because they didn't want to see me coming in to challenge them. So then those who didn't belong to the union wanted to join the union so that they could get the same attention. I had to use a lot of savvy to get things, but I got things done, to show that the union was really a viable force.

INTERVIEWER: Did you feel that there was support in the International [Union] for the kinds of stuff you were doing?

ROBERTS: Well, the International didn't really know what I was doing. Vic [Gottbaum] knew more what I was doing. I would always be talking to him.

INTERVIEWER: And was he the district representative for Illinois at the time?

ROBERTS: Well, he was council director there, in a very small town. And although I was working for the state, I sort of made my home there, because I could talk to him and work out of that office.

INTERVIEWER: Did you feel that there were, sort of, informal caucuses and sort of, decisions made over beers and stuff that you weren't part of--that things would happen in the union that you didn't have any control over?

ROBERTS: Not in that setting, no. First of all, it couldn't have happened in the city [Chicago] because [Mayor] Daley hated us. And it couldn't have happened in the state because, you know, I was in the state and I was able to....I was using those procedures that exist, so they couldn't make deals or nothing like that.

INTERVIEWER: Because, the reason I asked is sometimes a lot of women organizers, I think, feel that decisions get made like, you know, in the male pool rooms, somehow that you aren't . . .

ROBERTS: I think that if that ever happened they would find themselves out on strike. That I won't stand for. That's undermining the worker and myself. I haven't had a privilege to that but, since I've developed to the point where I'm sort of independent, that if I was working with management and they sought to cut me out by dealing with Vic, Vic would call and talk to me, of course. I mean, if he didn't do it, I would just proceed, because I wouldn't know that anything was going on, and they'd find themselves out on the street. You see, because I just would not tolerate any nonsense when I'm dealing with them. I am fair, but I am not a cream puff! You know, no way!

INTERVIEWER: Were there attempts made like that? Did you see a lot of that kind of thing, where management would try....where they'd run around . . .

ROBERTS: Oh, yes. Sure. They'd call Vic, talk to Vic, when they felt they couldn't talk to me. And he'd ask me about the situation and I would tell him about it. And he'd say, "Couldn't you do so and so?" I'd say, "Absolutely not." And I'd explain to him what the situation was. I said, "And the workers are looking forward to this, and that's that." You know, he would just want to know. And then he would tell them, "I told him to call you. " I says, "Fine, I'll take care of it." He's always been giving me support. That's been the really marvelous thing, you know.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think before the change in the politics of the union in '64, were there pressures on him to do anything differently, do you think? Was he having a hard time?

ROBERTS: Oh, they fired him. And they fired me. Because I would not take the workers' votes to the convention and leave them at home. I said, "No, I think they should go. This is going to be a very critical convention. They saved up their money to go, and I just won't do that. I think that's an insult to them. This is a democracy." So they read that as being disloyal.

INTERVIEWER: Which convention, '62?

ROBERTS: Yes. And so then they said, "Well, we'll cut you off the payroll." So they cut me off the payroll so that the people in the locals picked me up on their payroll. And so I was able to stay alive to get into that convention.

INTERVIEWER: What period of your life was the union responsibility the heaviest?

ROBERTS: I have remembered crisis after crisis, ever since I have been in the union. I can recall the strikes--these are the most dramatic things to me--the six month strike with workers who I didn't know whether they would understand the meaning of unionism or not. And they had to sacrifice so much. And I was so pained by the whole scene. That was a very dramatic time for me, you know. I lost weight, and I stayed on that line with them the whole time and everything.

And then I can remember some of the locals. A couple of the locals, where the treasurers had stolen the money and they tried to make it look as if other people handled the money. When I made a deposit, I had to handle the money, and that was....the local was on the verge of being split apart--that was in one of the white locals. That was, I felt, dramatic. But it really turned out....people were marvelous. There was no problem for me at all. They took care of him.

And I can remember coming here and just thinking that, oh, the [AFSCME International Union] president, we had it changed from Arnold Zander, who was sort of outdated, to Jerry Wurf. And I was very much part of the fight, and having them to follow me around and to harrass me and all kinds of things. And go in and try to create racial problems. They told the whites, "What do you want with her--she's black." And they just put them out. I mean, those kinds of things was very dramatic for me, but I was able to withstand....I stood up to the International Union president more than any single individual at that time, because I felt that....that's 'cause I was...."I would not take your votes from you. I think you should go. This is a very big decision."

By that time, with him talking negative against me, because he figured I had talked negative to them, and I didn't....they threw him out. They downright threw him out. It was the biggest insult that could have ever happened to an international president.

And then I can recall that, after the election, they had me elected as vice-president, in fact as the newly elected persons I ran higher than anybody throughout the international.

INTERVIEWER: That was in '64?

ROBERTS: Yes. Well, I was the first black woman that was vice-president of any union.

Then I recall I had to leave that position to come here [New York City] because hospitals was in trouble here. It was a very important part of our union. It had just lost six thousand people in social service. And the Teamsters Union was challenging us. And it was a very dramatic time. And the Teamsters had two members to every one that we had. And they had a lot of muscle.

INTERVIEWER: This was New York.

ROBERTS: This was New York, now. There was stabbings; there was fighting; there was all kinds of things going on. And I had to walk into this. And then internally the people in this union, you know, the staff felt as if: "Why is she coming here? We should have the job." That was a very trying time for me, a very trying six, seven, eight months. But we won that election. And I won it with the people, because we, we talked with each other. And I took them out of the shop. I took no one else. And worked with them. And then we together got the job done.

Then I can remember being asked....I went on to about three other elections following that and won them. It was very hard. You see, each time you get into these things, they're tough, because I take them very seriously. And you gotta plan, you gotta put in hours, twelve hours a day is nothing. You got to go around the clock, because people are working around the clock.

Then the next dramatic bit was to organize for the state. And we were going to try to take over the state, institutional workers. We didn't have that much time. We were battling [Governor] Rockefeller in order to have the right to have the election. That was a very trying time for us, but then I took out . . .

INTERVIEWER: . . . about the New York State workers.

ROBERTS: Yes. I managed to force [Governor] Rockefeller to set the thing up for the election, although I went to jail at that time for two weeks. It was scheduled for a month, but the people's outcry was so powerful that they let me out. I was given the heaviest sentence of any labor leader in New York, you know, for that stuff. And then he was violating the law and forced me to violate the law in order to get justice for us. Really, I

ROBERTS: thought that was the most humiliating thing to me. I learn all the time how much I think right is important and how little other people think of it, you know. The world turns into a jungle, you know, if you permit it to exist. That was a very dramatic time for me.

And then, I guess my last memories was during that time that Albert Shanker* was trying to raid the school aides. And I was involved in that. We came out of that and very beautifully but....these was times when I was really on the line. And each one of these things you have to mount a certain energy. And then, of course, the most recent hospital strike. I guess it lasted four days. It was a tough one, you know. Our city-wide strike is another very dramatic moment in my life, where I have to do all the planning for the action and be responsible for staff getting in the right places at the right time and doing the right things. And keeping the morale up and taking care of the needs of rank and filers to make sure that they feel comfortable with what's going on. And that's a lot when you're under pressure. I try to plan as much in advance as possible, but things happen during the course of a crisis. And then Vic has to do the negotiating, take up that end, but he never had to worry about his field, it's going to be all right.

But those were the most dramatic moments in my lifetime. There was always a new challenge. There always seemed to be, maybe the most important, I guess it's because it's of the moment. Each one of those just gave me a lot more love for people, because they never let me down.

INTERVIEWER: Before were there other women who reached high positions in the union before you, or were you the first to come up as high in the union as you did?

ROBERTS: I think I'm the first.

INTERVIEWER: When you were active, did you devote much energy to what you thought were women's issues? Do you think there were special problems for women in the union?

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* President of the American Federation of Teachers.

ROBERTS: I tried to encourage them. In fact, I think my very existence is encouraging to them. We have a lot of women presidents, a lot of women stewards. And when I want something, they're there. And it's so beautiful, because I think people think women are jealous of me. But not in this union. They aren't at all. It's not that feeling, you know. We're just together, you know. The men as well. Now men is a little bit, uh, very respectful. They take directions very well and everything, but I guess sometimes they wonder, "Well, why me?" I don't know. But they never show that. They never show that to me. They're just marvelous. And I'm always aware of the fact that their manhood is probably out front--I don't care who they are, it's gotta be there. I think the only one who may not feel that way is Vic. I'm just a buddy. I'm just here, you know, and we've been in so much problem. We just read each other. I know what I have to do, and he knows what he has to do.

All of these things has certainly been with his support, but I'm given the action part of it.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think that there are special problems for women in the union that have to be dealt with separately?

ROBERTS: I think that to get more participation from young women who.... that's one of the problems. You don't have a lot of very young women, unless they're not married. If they're married young, chances are they're not going to be too active. They got their youngsters at home, and their husband doesn't quite understand, unless he's a union man. The only way we get to see the young women is when the young men are active in the union. And we are getting a lot more youth now. And some of them always responds negatively to the union initially because of the climate that's created by the media. The media never says that a union is justified in its position. You know, I think people ought to think about that a little bit. Never. And it's because they are part of the establishment that oppress workers. You know. And, therefore, they will always find justification for saying, "Oh, what a shame. This strike is this and it's that; and look what it's going to cost the economy." But never the justification, and maybe a turnaround in society that may cost the economy.

I was talking about the media more or less. I'm always disturbed about that. I see the labor movement as being such an intricate part of our democracy in the United States. I see it as, as preserving that democracy, because it is a way for a group of people to express their feelings, you see. And

ROBERTS: when it's stymied or when it's attempted to be choked off, I think we got real problems. And I don't think the media give 'em credit. They are always quick to talk about what's happening with a Hoffa or what's happening with some corruption. And if you think about industry or you think about banks, they probably have as much of the same corruption. But it's highlighted in such a way that the very instrument the workers can use as an outcry, an expression of their desires, is almost a suspicious instrument for them. And I hate to see that. And I'm constantly talking about that.

I can recall when we went on strike in hospitals, and how all of the people decided to forego some of their cost of living increase in order to preserve the jobs in the hospitals. And six months later the city found money, you know, for us to retain our monies. And now Mayor Beame is talking about giving the realtors back five dollars for every thousand--and we talked about a fiscal crisis! I mean, you begin to wonder about this thing, but it's never put together so that workers know they got a shafting, you see. This is the thing that kills me more than anything else. And when I see these things, they make me very militant, because I get very angry about that kind of sophisticated injustice inflicted upon people who are trying to make a living.

INTERVIEWER: One of the things we talked about earlier when you talked about when you were younger, and I asked you about whether you thought if you'd ever make it out of the ghetto and you said, "Partly," that you didn't think you had any models. Do you have a sense now that you play that role for other women?

ROBERTS: I never think about it that way, but I think I do. Their reaction to me tells me that I'm sort of like being observed by them, which is quite a responsibility. Because I like to be myself, and I like to have fun. You know, I don't think that....but everything you do is supposed to be so stereotyped, I guess. But I don't let it bother me. I'm just me.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think that there's more space in your union for women to play a role there now than there was fifteen or twenty years ago?

ROBERTS: Oh, yes. We have an assistant division director, a woman. We have a large number of women representatives in the field. I guess a third of them are. And almost, well,

ROBERTS: several of our departments and divisions have women, and it's number one and number two.

INTERVIEWER: Even in other unions where there is as many women in the membership as AFSCME, that's fairly unusual. Do you think there's a particular reason why it's different here than in other unions?

ROBERTS: I think it's the structure. Each local union, which consists of certain titles of people--types of workers--can elect, have to elect their own president, their own executive board and so on. And so that gives them a freedom of expression in small areas which brings out leadership. But it's kind of amazing that in clericals, where that's largely women, they have chosen males. But it's probably, it's predominantly minority. A large segment of them, the most active, is minority. I think maybe that might have to do with it, that feeling of pushing their males out, because males have not had, I mean, black males have had a very difficult struggle. I mean, that story has never been told. It's even worse than the female.

INTERVIEWER: If you had to relive any part of your life again, what would it be?

ROBERTS: I think I'd like to leave it as it is. It's done all right by me. And I think that all of the things that was very sad to me at one time also enriched me. That's the way I look at it. That's the way I've used it, as a learning and enriching situation that helps me to be more understanding of other people. And I wouldn't want to give that up with the kind of work that I'm called upon to do.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think that working with women made a difference? Was it easier to work with women than with men, or did you always think it was pretty much the same?

ROBERTS: I just think--people. It's a very funny thing. I don't.... when I meet a person, I will certainly know whether they're male or female, and I'll certainly know whether they're black or white, but when I get beyond the initial observation of what they are, then it's what they are really about. That's what has more meaning to me. You know. You meet some very, very good people. Some of them you just love talking to, because they seem to be on the same wave length. And then others--you're polite--but you don't care, you don't share the same values, you know. I think it's people with me. I've always loved them. I like to sit and watch them.

ROBERTS: I could sit for hours and just watch people. It's just a.... it might sound strange, but I enjoy it. And I could almost tell what the personality is like by the expression, by the face. Some people have very....some people get older and the personality sets in the face. Very mean. You could see these lines on their faces. You know, they're ready to bite you. And there's others, you know, very pleasant little faces. And it's because they've been very pleasant with people, most of them. It look like older women, you see--a little mother, some of them who are very warm, and some of them who are very growly, I mean. I just get the feeling that that kind of go together. The inside comes outside, you know. And I've observed that.

INTERVIEWER: Did you ever feel that in all the years you worked in the union that you were very discouraged, that somehow it wasn't worth it, that there had to be a better way to live your life?

ROBERTS: I get a little uptight sometimes because there are so many pressures on me. You want to relax. You know, you must remember, I have a lot of responsibility at home, too. And it's not like somebody's there to grab my shoes. You know, I'm very ordinary, because I carry a lot of responsibility for my family, which was poor, still poor, and depends upon me a lot. I have a sick brother that I take care of who is older than I, and my mother, and the two boys now, and no husband. So, where I might make an adequate income, it's like two people working, and things to do, and so a lot of things I'm not able to do that would relieve me of a lot of pressures. So I share some of the things in the house as well. In many ways it doesn't bother me, because it keeps me in touch with what I have to do for the kinds of people that I represent. So I'm not....it's not any kind of relief that I'm doing something at home that's quite different. But there are times when I feel that the union has sapped, like, all my life, because it takes so much. It takes almost every waking hour.

INTERVIEWER: When we were talking about why you went in for hospital work and didn't stay working in a plant, you said one of the things that you felt when you worked in a plant was that you were part of the machinery, and that it was real different. But a lot of hospital workers have complained about working in a hospital, in fact, makes you feel the same way. Did you feel it at all when you were doing that, or did you feel that that complaint is more typical of what goes on in a lot of hospitals now?

ROBERTS: I think if they feel that way, then the responsibility for that probably is the administration or the supervisor's responsibility. Because I don't know how anyone working with people can feel that way. People are very interesting. They're very different, and you have to relate to them different, which gives you variety on the job. They're very appreciative, because they're in a helpless situation. It has nothing to do with the class of person, whether they're poor or they have anything. And they're very dependent upon you. They make you feel necessary. So anybody who doesn't get those kind of basic thrills out of it....basically there's two things: either they don't belong there or the administration fails to stimulate and motivate them and show them the beauty of serving mankind....womankind.

INTERVIEWER: Do you get that kind of complaint when you talk to aides about the kinds of problems they have in hospitals at all--that they would try to give human care and they can't, because of the way the thing is set up?

ROBERTS: I think that when there is a vast shortage of help, and people have to just quickly do things, their temperaments are very short, they're rude, and they do not get the satisfaction out of the job, because they really don't complete it, you know? And all they get then is perhaps complaints from people who are not fully satisfied, but they are satisfied within the limits that you are able to help them. So that could mean very much that they would complain about it. I'm sure that would be basically the reasons.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think it's gotten worse now? I mean, like, particularly in the New York hospitals, do you think the situation is worse than when you were working?

ROBERTS: I think it's worse. It's worse because they're trying to operate with far less people. And the people who have a heart are frustrated by that because they have to go on to patients so quickly that they are unable to make them as comfortable as they'd like. And they don't get the self-satisfaction of seeing a patient smile or combing their hair, or doing little nice things that make them comfortable--rubbing their back anymore, or changing their beds as frequently as they should, tidying up a room before the visitors come--all those little nice things that make them appreciate you and respond to you differently. And now sometimes, more frequent than before, patients are hostile, because they don't expect you to be with them long. If you're too long answering the light, they take that out on you, and you're just the victim of what has happened, you know, in cutbacks.

INTERVIEWER: I was going to ask some questions. I read in the interim, since we talked last, the book--Louanne Ferris' book called I'M DONE CRYING. I had a couple of questions that came out of that. One if that . . .

ROBERTS: One of the young ladies in that book . . .

INTERVIEWER: I was wondering about that because there was a write-up in the paper. Do you know the history of the book at all? I'm curious if you know.

ROBERTS: It was more or less dealing with, dealing with the internal mechanism of city hospitals such as Kings County. That was really the subject of discussion.

INTERVIEWER: Uh-huh.

ROBERTS: From the forties up 'till now.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think it reflected what you know about the hospital honestly on some level. It's a bit romanticized.

ROBERTS: It might, yes. It might have reflected some things--probably has more of a dramatic appearance because it's in a book and they have to make it colorful and all, but it does....and I don't think just the municipal hospitals, and every hospital. You have to remember that the employees in the hospital, in the main, are people from minority groups, particularly among the nonprofessional. And the conduct on the part of these groups is the same, whether it's municipal hospitals or voluntary hospitals. So I can't see it being so different. It's just that there's been a lot more freedom of them expressing what happens in a municipal hospital than there would have been in a voluntary hospital.

INTERVIEWER: Do you also think that there's sometimes more money in voluntaries just so that there are more workers, and so that people don't have to speed up quite so much?

ROBERTS: I don't know whether they have so many more workers. I think they have a lot more luxury appearance, which takes care of a lot of people who go in and see that the walls are cheerful and that there's fairly decent looking drapes....thinks that's the way you measure whether it's a good hospital, and it's not at all. When I was in the hospital, probably

ROBERTS: about five years ago, I would talk to the nurse over the intercom. And that's about the size of it. And then maybe a practical nurse would bring in the medication that was required. But you would only see the supportive staff. And they were busy. They were running around, between the trays and making beds and things like that. You was almost embarrassed to ask for anything to make you comfortable. So patients sort of help each other. And I think that you find more of that in the voluntary hospital, because the patients are not as sick as in municipal hospitals. You need more people in municipal hospitals. Two reasons: one is research going on that requires a lot more attention; and two because the patients are sicker than they are in voluntary hospitals. They have anywhere from one to five things wrong with them because they wait. They practice crisis medicine.

INTERVIEWER: One of the things that she talked about in the book was her sense of the rigid hierarchy within nursing. Did you, do you feel that that's still one of the major problems in the hospital?

ROBERTS: I think in a hospital setting it's like a small town in many ways. And the class structure is very, very structured. The doctor is God, the nurse is the angel, and the supportive help is nothing. And they always find a way of shifting off blame or anything else onto the supportive help. It's just that way; I mean that's the structure. They're afraid to even have nurse's aides to come in when they're giving a report to the changing guard of nurses, because they would feel it would give them too much dignity. And yet you will have the nurse's aides who will be the ones who will have to take care of the patients all evening. So they should be told that: "Mrs. Jones will not have any more fluids after a certain hours, because she's going up to surgery," or she can't eat anything. That aide should be told that. And it could cost Mrs. Jones' life. So it's just a lack of giving any kind of dignity and recognition to supportive staff that demoralizes them and makes for a very rigid class difference.

INTERVIEWER: How has the union, over the years, tried to deal with that issue?

ROBERTS: I have brought it up a number of times, about team cooperation. And now, through productivity efforts, we may be able to get it in. But it's been very, very hard to do.

ROBERTS: The other thing is not having enough nurses to a large degree. Sometimes it may be a licensed practical nurse that's in charge rather than a registered nurse. But whoever it is, that should be one of the standing policies--cooperation. And it probably should be communicated through the nursing department. That's central--that throughout the orientation, how important it is to bring in the supportive staff at the change in shifts, so that they know exactly what's going on with the patients in their general area.

INTERVIEWER: What is the productivity work that you referred to? You said something about productivity stuff being done in the hospitals now.

ROBERTS: Well, we have a coalition of labor and management people who are looking at the hospital for how things can be done in a more efficient way. And the union has had a lot of suggestions, and management now is feeling a bit free to open up and bring their suggestions. And we will discuss it. There surely is some things that they want to change that, because they don't do it in a proper fashion, the union may resist. Because the union doesn't understand how important it is. The union may resist. So I think if we can sit down and discuss what it is that they want to do, and if it makes sense to us, then we have to both work out jointly how it can be done. And that's what's going on now.

INTERVIEWER: Can you give me some concrete examples of some of the issues that come up in those discussions?

ROBERTS: Well, one that is very apparent at this time is that the dietary aides have been in abundance since there has been a change as to the feeding methods in the hospital. They have cafeteria style, and the food that they have for the patients is pretty much what they have for the employees to purchase. So they don't need as many dietary aides as they did. And they still are carrying some of them, and they should perhaps become clerks. They need more clerks. But that requires some training perhaps, maybe none. And it requires a mechanism to take the noncompetitive into the civil service arena. And that could be done with them sitting down and talking to us about it.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think that there's a possibility that through that kind of management-union joint discussion, things like the issue of aides sitting in on shift reports could be worked out?

ROBERTS: Yes, it could. I think, however, that now we have this pilot program on productivity and for hospitals that this is an issue that should be handled centrally. And I intend to do it on the central productivity board, because it should be a policy. Because it's good patient care. And it has been a running debate between the union and the hospitals on who should pass out the trays. And I think that some decisions are made because politically maybe the nurses don't want to do something. But it may not have to do with good patient care.

An example is that they wanted the dietary aides to pass out the trays to the patients. And my feeling was they should issue the food, but they should not pass out the trays. And the reason being that the dietary aides was not supposed to proper position patients, you know, put them up or down. They shouldn't even have their hands on the knob of the bed, because they don't know what's wrong with the patients. And they mix in the tuberculin patients, the ones with hepatitis, everybody's sort of together. And she really doesn't know whether the patient is contagious or not. Nor should she go back and handle a roll or something and put it on someone else's tray.

And the other issue is if she takes it [the tray] in and puts it on the bedside table, and the nurse's aide has to come in and roll the patient up or down, that frequently the nurse's aide is not behind her, the food gets cold, and it doesn't make sense to have two people going in when the nurse's aide and the nurse--in the absense of an aide--to take the tray in, and would do several things. She would know exactly what the patient....would have her tray on the bedside table. She'd be getting up for that time. We have it over here. Sometimes you get 'em out of bed with the tray. Or they would put the patient up so they could eat it, or maybe they was a patient that shouldn't be let up. They should be on the side and the tray be put in the bed. All those things could be done. And then when they pick up the tray, they could see whether the patient had had a full meal or ask, "Why didn't you eat, Ms. Jones?" I mean, this is all part of reporting to the doctor. So that to me was good nursing care. So I argue that it doesn't make any difference to me whether the dietary aide, a housekeeping aide do it--it's just not good nursing care from where I come from. And I been in a hospital most of my life, you know. And that is that they should take a responsibility.

ROBERTS: Frequently the doctors come in. They make rounds. They change the diet. And the dietary aide may not know that. And if the nurse's aide is coming to pick up the tray, and she says, "Oh, the doctor just changed it. She's on a liquid diet because she's going up to surgery this afternoon." That's a very important thing.

But if the dietary aide took it out, the patient would eat the food before anybody would recognize what was going on. So, there's a whole series of things that I feel should be addressed that should not be political in this nature--that nurses, because there was a shortage of nurse's aides, did not want nursing department to be involved in passing the trays. That was the only sole reason for it, which I felt jeapardized the health and safety of the patients.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think the nursing aides that you've talked to want to take on that function?

ROBERTS: Oh, sure. They have always done it, so it's not taking on anything. It's just there was not enough of them. So what would happen is that the nurses had come out, because otherwise it would take an hour-and-a-half to pass the trays. And so they would have to join them. And they would prefer sitting at the desks chatting with the doctors, you know.

INTERVIEWER: In fact, in the hospital that I worked in as a volunteer, dietary aides brought them, put them on the side table, but couldn't set the patient up. But then they would send me in as the volunteer who knew even less, mind you, than the dietary aide about what to do to help feed.

ROBERTS: Uh-huh.

INTERVIEWER: So it was even worse. That was one of the things I was supposed to do as a volunteer was to help feed, which I always thought was crazy.

ROBERTS: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: And scared me enormously. Because I felt that was too much responsibility for me.

ROBERTS: Well, certain patients just can't have anybody feeding them. They may choke to death. You may be feeding them too fast. You might have to encourage them to eat. You might have to talk to them while they're eating. There's a whole series of things that comes with knowing what the patient is all about.

INTERVIEWER: One of the things that was in the Ferris book is that she uses an expression "old crock" as a way to refer to sort of difficult patients. Do you remember other words like that that were used sort of as the language of being a nurse's aide, terms that you used to refer to people in the hospital, not so much just patients?

ROBERTS: Well, they may call them crabby. And that would probably apply to an elder patient who was very set in their way and sometimes a little difficult. They may say it, but it was almost because I came out of a very fine hospital, they said less of those kinds of things. If a patient was anywhere near decent at all, nobody ever said anything negative about him. They'd have to be really pretty bad.

INTERVIEWER: What do you think defined a decent patient? What did you have to be to be a good patient?

ROBERTS: Well, a patient who was cooperative. You might come in to a patient and say, "I have to give you an enema." And she'll say, "Why?" "Well, your doctor left an order for you to have an enema. Are you going up to surgery tomorrow?" You might hold a conversation with them. You might not know exactly why they're having the enema, and she give you a hard time, instead of giving it to the doctor. And the name of the game was you had to get the patient ready. And so she might not be too cooperative.

INTERVIEWER: One of the other things in the Ferris book is that she talked about a situation in which a patient died because she hadn't been given the right training to know what to do in a given situation. Have you ever had that kind of experience yourself, or have other nurse's aides talked to you about situations where they felt if they had been given just a little bit more knowledge, or someone had explained things more systematically, that they could have been more effective?

ROBERTS: Well, she might have underwent that because she was a practical nurse. So she would be wide open for it. But not so much with nurse's aides. I learned a tremendous amount, because in the operating room I circulated. And that means I would gown the doctor, sometimes scrubbed in and helped him with minor surgery. You know the instruments that they would use to pinch arteries. Each one of 'em had their own method. And all the instruments, they'd want a Kelly clamp or something else that they would use. And if a

ROBERTS: a patient, if I was circulating, appeared to be a little jaundiced, I would like, when I'm circulating, keep my eyes on everything. And you had to keep a sterile field and be able to....because, believe it or not, the professionals panic more than you do. And they start screaming at everybody when they panic. So if a patient looks a little jaundiced, I mean, looks a little blue, and they say, "Well, he's having difficulty breathing," then I would know what this doctor would normally do. And I always started to whip out all these things right away and put them on a little table, roll them over, and have them ready in the event so that he or she would be able to move right into it. I didn't wait to be asked. You see, so that was my primary thing, being alert. And I think that anybody that's really interested in the job tries to be of service and tries to understand, too, that everybody gets panicked when they're going to lose a patient.

INTERVIEWER: But is your sense....have you gotten complaints from other people that there are just times where no one let them learn?

ROBERTS: Yes. The more you teach a person in hospitals, the better the employees is. Because he feels important. And once you stop that process and try to keep him out of things, then they lose the whole zest to try to be effective. I think it creates the absenteeism--because if you have a person, for instance, that's very intelligent and that sweeps the same floor every day, he isn't too excited about that job. And every sick day he gets he's going to take it.

That's why I have always advocated that we needed workshops on an annual basis. What that does is reinforce the importance of everybody on the health team. Every single group should be called in. Even if it's a person who mops the floor, to tell them how important it is, and how they should handle the mop, so that they can get a minimum amount of dust, and they shouldn't cut corners because of what it would cost in terms of bacteria, you know, if they cut corners. And the whole science of their jobs. The new techniques that's out, the new cleaning fluids, you know, and all this kind of thing. And then, of course, the opportunity for them to move up in their field to become a nurse or become an aide, nurse's aide, or something like that, should be available to them. Of course, we do have that. Because some people get so interested in it that they then want to go on and put their hands on a patient, you know, which is very nice.

ROBERTS: The nurse's aide should have the same identical thing. When they're trying out new medications, they should talk about reactions to them. And when these patients are on it, these are the signs that we watch for. And on the service that they are working, they should know all about these things so that they can help the doctor, nurses, to observe the patient, since they are probably with the patient more than anybody else. So, these are all very interesting things, when you tell them that. They're there.

INTERVIEWER: Have you tried to get those kinds of things bargained for in contracts?

ROBERTS: We have....bargained for training funds. And I have spoken to the training office a number of times about these seminars. And it doesn't go anywhere--mainly because it's been in flux. And I don't think that they really know what it is that we want them to do. I've told them a thousand times. Or again, it could be the whole mentality of sharing too much information. Or, again, it could be that they don't have a standard way of taking care of patients in the various services. And, therefore, they feel that they can't enter that arena. But there's just so many things to talk about.

INTERVIEWER: Speaking of training, can you tell me what the outcome was of the training program to train aides into LPNs? Is it still going on?

ROBERTS: No, it is not. I think our last class was last year.

INTERVIEWER: When did the program start?

ROBERTS: It started in '68, I think it was. Sixty-seven, sixty-eight. And it went on until last year. And it was the most successful of all the funded programs throughout the country. There was 422 people in the first group that went in out of the first grant. Out of the 422 who went in, there probably was about eighty-seven percent of them who sustained themselves. And the others may have dropped out or got sick. A couple died, that kind of thing. And then out of the eighty-seven percent who took the state board, about ninety-six percent of them received their state board license. And then, an outgrowth of that is that they did do well, until we then began to tell the program to....not equivalent to a year, but eight months. And they did equally as well in the eight-month program.

We also had a mix of high school graduates and people who had eighth grade education. And we have a little remediation. And I think the difference was them feeling very

ROBERTS: comfortable about sharing any kind of problems that they had with the union. We had tours available, and we would go over in our joint meetings, I would want to know how well the students were doing. And anybody who was making a seventy-five was going to be called in for some tutoring. And anybody who was absent was going to be contacted as to what the problem was. And we just let them know we was interested in their success. We never changed anything that went into curriculum for the licensed practical nurse's courses, because I always felt that when people are given the opportunity and support, they can surmount the same thing as someone else. If people are supposed to be all equal, then we have to act like it. And we have to equalize certain conditions and then climb the mountain. And they were able to do that. Many of them went on to become licensed, registered nurses. Some of them went into medicine. There's a few of them which have become doctors. And they were highly motivated and very excited. And the only thing that I thought, and that we exercised, is that we didn't want people in the class that had poor attendance records. Because we felt that it would be a waste of money and everything else, so....that was one thing that I sort of insisted upon. You had to come to work to earn this, and you had to be in the service for at least two years.

It was marvelous. And we had technician classes. I did an analysis of the hospitals myself. And there were certain jobs that required technical skills that was over beyond being a nurse's aide. And we earmarked those, and had those made as well, which gave a certain amount of prestige. And perhaps the increase was like $500 or $600 when you complete those courses, and they ran from two months to six months. And when you finished the licensed practical nurse's courses, then it was somewhere between $1000, $1200 difference in salary. So, each one of those things were incentives to get people all excited.

INTERVIEWER: Why did the program end?

ROBERTS: It ended because we had no money, and then the other thing was, well, they....become....the crisis, more than anything else. And then they said that there were now a large number of nurses in the field, that they didn't have jobs. At one time, there was two thousand. So if the market is full, then we didn't want to flood that market. And I haven't had a chance to really assess that, because, as you know, we just concluded all the crisis that we've had.

INTERVIEWER: One other question. Ferris talks about a way in which management dealt with workers who were giving them a hard time by sending them to what she called "mental hygiene," and that you had to be seen by a psychiatrist before he or she would certify that you could get back on your job if you were having problems. And it was a way to cool people out and sort of keep them off their job, penalized from working for a couple of days, because you would end up sitting in this person's office for three or four days before they could see you. Do you think that that's common, or do you know of other kinds of subtle forms of punishment that are used in hospitals?

ROBERTS: It surely doesn't happen now, but those were the cruel tactics that was utilized before there was a union. And I think that management had different ways of applying pressure to people who had--who they had claimed had--problems. It could have been that the supervisor had the problem. You would have to assess that.

It does not happen now. I think people feel that there is somebody they can go to--not to say that we don't have some members who need personal services. And we address ourselves to that. That's earmarked by someone who goes off on binges, or who has real distress in their family, and they bring that to the job. We try to help with that. We knew that we needed to have the personal services, because we're talking about relatively poor population.

INTERVIEWER: One of the things I wanted to ask you is earlier....on one of the earlier tapes we talked about the union that was in Lying-In Hospital when you first came to work there. And you said that it was a weak union, and that it only collected hand dues. And I wanted to make sure: a) that I understood what hand dues was, and b) what you meant when you said it was weak.

ROBERTS: It was weak because nobody felt that it could do anything. And I think that when I called and when I really needed them that nobody from downtown with expertise came out to help me with my problem. They were telling me what I should do about my problem, not understanding that the average worker feels powerless when they go up against their superiors. They like to know that there's somebody there like a lawyer or somebody representing them. And I didn't really have that.

When I speak of hand dues I mean, meant that it was a voluntary union--that you could pay your dues and you didn't have them. And so we didn't have check-off at that time. And so many, many months some people didn't pay at all. Then again, they may pay for one month--that kind of thing. It was not a regular thing other than . . .

INTERVIEWER: Also when we were talking about when you were beginning to do organizing, you said that sometimes it was really hard to get people to go along with the union viewpoint. You talked about the specifics of doing organizing. And I just was curious if you explain more specifically what kinds of techniques you use to get people who don't understand what a union can do over to the union side, and how you organize them--what the mechanics are, what kind of stuff . . .

ROBERTS: Normally when I'm organizing, I first find out what the conditions are. And then I try to....surely if they're not organized, the conditions is far less superior than an organized shop. And then I get all the positive things that they don't have, and that's my talking point. When I see them I say, "Because you're not organized, you don't have this, you don't have that, you don't have the other, and these other workers do have it." Of course, you start to introduce these things through leaflet. Then you begin to talk to them, and then you get a few bites, a few people who are a little more forward. Those are the first ones that you get. Sometimes you have to be careful that you don't get just the rabble rousers or somebody on the verge of being fired that wants to use the union, or somebody that's disliked by everyone else. Then you pick them up and you lose everybody else. So you really have to look for the person that they respect the most and you find that out through conversations with them. They have to like you as a person, because they have nothing else to go on at that point.

And then I try to expose them to using their own five senses to investigate things that I tell them, so that they can be thoroughly convinced it's not what I'm saying, but something they've checked out. In any way that I can--try to get them to go to the nearest hospital. They should raise questions with the workers there if they don't believe me--in particular if it's an organized hospital, this kind of thing.

And then I try, of course, to get them together in order to do something about it. I tell them how we can protect them, that there are laws to protect them. I tell them what to expect from the bosses because we're now organizing, and that they have to stand up to it. I try to sense whether they are frightened, and I have to take it a little easier than I would normally until I get them to a point where I can handle the situation. And I might have to do a lot of fronting for them at first.

ROBERTS: And then you get a few where you have very strong people. And when you get them strong enough, then you begin to use the strong ones to stand up and talk to their peers about what it is that they know about the union and why they want to belong to it. And you push them forward. And you give them support and leadership. And you do things together, develop a program around what their needs are, and let them get convinced that this is a beautiful thing, something that they want. And then those are the goals that you vote for collectively.

INTERVIEWER: What's your sense about the resistance that workers have to unionization, and can you talk a little bit about whether you think there are any differences between both black and white people about resistance to unionization--also between men and women in the hospital about unionization?

ROBERTS: Well, people's first impression of a union is that it's a bunch of thugs out to get my dues. That's a very normal reaction. It was my reaction, the same as it was everybody else's reaction. And because I know that that exists, I try to remove it. I would never--and it's not good to go to organize white workers if you're black, just by yourself. I mean, I had that experience. And at first Vic was with me for awhile. Then I was left alone. And it was much harder for me, and it took me much, much longer. And I had to be very, very tolerant of my situation, but I overcame it. But that is not the favorable way to go and then be a woman. You should have basically the infinite mix with you that reflects the workforce so that they can relate. It's much better. You know, two or three of you, if it's a big place, so that they can relate with each other. And you must be very pleasant and very kind and take a lot of abuse, because they're going to give you some of that. But if they see that you're pretty persistent and that you are decent and all that, they get curious about you.

And I tried to have a fixed time that I would go so that they would look forward to me. Before long they say, "I missed you last Wednesday, why weren't you here?" And it's this kind of thing. You build a solid kind of relationship. And each time that I would go to organize I would have a leaflet. And every leaflet would be information, sometimes about themselves, and other times about what could be done about it. And other times, reporting on what's happening in the hospital. So they know that I'm right there almost, you know.

Then I have a way of getting into the hospital itself, and sitting down talking to the workers, you know. Each leaflet could be different, based on what the real concerns are. And that's where you really got to know what you're organizing, what the real problems are, because you got to talk to the gut issues.

INTERVIEWER: Have you ever been kept out of a hospital during an organizing drive?

ROBERTS: I have been put out. I've been caught in the basement talking. It was easy for me to mingle with the workforce because I am a minority. And I would get up and leave. But I would have gotten what I wanted.

INTERVIEWER: You were going to answer the question about whether there were specific categories of workers that were resistant to unionization more than others.

ROBERTS: Yes. I would think white collar and the professional workers are a little more removed from the union. They feel it's a blue collar thing.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think that's changed over the years?

ROBERTS: I think that they are now assessing the situation where the blue collar workers is outpacing them financially and that there is a reason for it, because they're organized. When you have the construction workers who make far more than.... certainly people aren't necessarily judged by what they do, because it requires skill--but more than college professors, than that's a real turnabout, around, about our education, you know. And I think it's because it's been such late organization which has put things totally out of balance. I think people who are responsible for people, who I would assume that we all would think is the most precious thing in the world, certainly should be paid for their efforts in doing whatever it is that they do. And it is not rewarded--not monetarily rewarded, anyway.

INTERVIEWER: One of the things we've seen at the Boston hospitals that hasn't been in AFSCME so much as Local 1199 has lost drive after drive within the last two years in the Boston hospitals. And one of the things that I've seen a lot of is a very sophisticated sort of racism that goes on by management.

ROBERTS: Well, that's the problem. Management's way of fighting back. And as you know, in the hospitals they are hired along racial lines. The nonprofessional is more or less the minority person, because the salaries are nothing to get excited about. And the professional persons who make very good salaries in the main, particularly in the voluntary hospitals--that's one of the reasons the cost of health care is very high--not because of the nonprofessionals, but administrators and that kind of staffing, doctors. The nurses

ROBERTS: don't even make that much. And they're able to bust the union. And, of course, with a very strong class situation in hospitals, I think that the air can be poisoned by them talking down the hospital, unless you got a pretty sophisticated group of workers. Because they want in, you know. They're saying, "Those unions, those crooks." I mean, they pass those kind of remarks that almost make the guy who needs the union ashamed.

INTERVIEWER: How do you deal with that when you're organizing? How do you deal with that kind of management strategy?

ROBERTS: Well, I'm sure I run across all kinds of management strategy. I don't worry about what they do. I try to build up my own credibility with people and show them what can be done and what they're being denied and what this person is really saying is protect their own self-interest versus theirs. And I try not to run a negative campaign, but I'll respond if I'm asked, or if I see that what has been stated has taken hold of the people I'm organizing. Then I'll have to set out to respond to it.

INTERVIEWER: It's hard to say in hospitals because so many of the workers are women, but do you think there's a difference between the way men and women in hospitals respond to the union drives?

ROBERTS: Between men and women?

INTERVIEWER: Yes.

ROBERTS: I think the men would like to see a union move more than the women, perhaps....although the women are great, in nonprofessional categories. But the men may be a little more receptive but have some fears and don't want to be seen talking to you around them. But they will talk to you.

INTERVIEWER: Is it harder to get to talk to the women, do you think?

ROBERTS: No, because....you see, you're able to....I can always kind of tell, because I'm very interested in people. If I'm passing out leaflets the first time, they may throw them down; they may be negative about it. And I'll continue to be nice. I'll say, "Good morning. How are you?" And begin to start a relationship with them. They may speak to me or not; it's perfectly all right. And then the next time I'll come around, I'll say, "It's me again." I'll pass my leaflets out, and then the next time I'll come around the same time and say, "I didn't see you last time." I begin to try to pull out some of them. And then you may see somebody come

ROBERTS: up and stand out and talk to you. And sometimes you have to be suspicious of that person, because they may be sent out to do it. Because normally the first reaction is a little fear on the part of the worker.

And then I might, when we finish passing out the leaflets, then I'll slowly walk away or sit in my car for a little while, or something like that. Because sometimes the workers will run out and ask me, "I'd like to talk to you." I say, "Give me your phone number." And they may drop it in my hand as some of them go in. I might know one or two people in there and have them to start to get names and addresses, and telephone numbers, and make some house calls, and sit down and try to give the comfort to, and build my army slowly. And so you have a chain thing going.

Once you convince one or two workers, then you ask if they'd be kind enough to get a couple people you could talk to. Then they will come with a couple of people. Then you go to see them. Any arrangements that they want to make--I'm willing to meet them all the way. If I got to go to their home, or they want to come to the office, or they want to come to my home, you know, it doesn't matter. And then I'll talk to them. And if I can convince them, then I have them reach out for more. And then I begin to tell them exactly what's going to happen. And everything we do is sort of shared. And when a leaflet is passed out, "What was the reaction to it?" And I'll listen to everybody, because you don't know when you got somebody in your camp that don't belong there. And I never let one particular group know about the other one, in case management wants to start playing games with my people before I'm strong enough to take 'em on. So every....you just have a different way; it depends upon the group.

INTERVIEWER: You, at one point earlier, you talked about how you try to make decisions talking to rank and file about how they feel about specific issues. Have you been in specific circumstances where you felt that the decision that was being made by the majority of the rank and file was wrong?

ROBERTS: Yes, I have.

INTERVIEWER: Could you describe what that would be?

ROBERTS: Well, there's been so many little ones that....nothing real major. I have had....the last strike for instance, when my large groups voted to accept the agreement--and that's all

ROBERTS: I really needed was the large groups. But then there was one small group of probably thirty-five people who said that they were not going to accept the agreement. I told them that it was going to result in people being laid off, because they were going to lay off enough people to make up the money if they didn't accept the agreement. And they said, "Well, we're not accepting it." And then I let them alone. I says, "Well, that is your desire, and that's what you want, fine."

And then it was probably four or five months, they began to send the notices out to lay them off, which I knew they were going to do. They reversed their decision, and then they wanted to talk to me about it, but this was the professionals who thought they knew more than the union leadership. And I just let them alone. And then when they started laying them off, they made a whole reverse. And, of course, when we got the money back, and they got theirs back, they were very grateful to the union. But I think they was just a little hesitant about accepting. Because they had been cut back, cut back. And so this was just another phase of it. And I had to let them go just down to the wire, and I knew it was going to come to that. And then they had to make a decision.

INTERVIEWER: So you think that the issues come down a lot to just sort of strategy decisions about when do you keep fighting, when don't you, what issues do you pick, what don't you?

ROBERTS: Yes, I had people who wanted to go on strike when we didn't think it was wise to go on strike. And I could always pull out my credentials and stand up before them and tell them that there's not a person in that room more militant than I am. I said, "But I also don't practice committing suicide. You don't do that, but once."

And then I explain to them what the issues are and that we have to be adults about it. And I'm willing to yield to the majority, but I as a person who is supposed to be one of their leaders have a responsibility to tell them what I see. And I'm telling them what I see. And if they vote it down, fine. I'll go with you, reluctant certainly, but I'll go with you. But, "don't say I didn't tell you," They vote your way.

INTERVIEWER: Have you ever been in a situation where people wildcatted even though you didn't agree to support the strike?

ROBERTS: I've had them outraged, and then they'd be out doing something we didn't know about. And then I would come into it.... and listen to what they had to say, and go and take their business.

INTERVIEWER: Can you give me a specific example of that?

ROBERTS: Well, we had the Children's Shelter where they didn't have enough help. I guess youngster who were locked up there.... was attacking the workers. And so they went on a wildcat strike. And we found out about it, and we had to go and get it resolved by getting help for them. Now, they had been complaining to the chairman who had not said anything to us, who chose not to say anything. And then when that happened we had to go up in front of his office.

INTERVIEWER: And so did you try to end the strike and try to reach . . .

ROBERTS: Yes. But I did not end it without extracting from management those things they were truly entitled to.

INTERVIEWER: Is that a common occurrence, do you think? That kind of wildcatting?

ROBERTS: No. We have very little of that. Because we have a mechanism that gets things back to us.

INTERVIEWER: What is that mechanism?

ROBERTS: First, if the president has problems, he has to contact this office. Any of the staff....most of the time the staff know about the problem because the rank and file has had a better time with them than they do their officers, mainly because our officers are working people--officers in any local union that we have, that is. And, if the staff hears there's a problem, then the member has a right to contact the division director. And if the division director doesn't move on it, then I found out about it. The member will call me. And if they don't know all the other structures, the one thing they know is to call up here. Most of them, they know that. Whether it's the shop steward who isn't getting what they were supposed to, or what have you. And then I immediately investigate the situation. So that has minimized a lot of the complaints.

And frequently it's not that our officer didn't do his job--the person might not have understood everything that went on. And I will sometimes tell them the same thing. And because I said it to them, it's a little different. And other times I may have a different approach to how it should be handled--not that the staff didn't do it, but they may not have gone as far as I think they should have. And so I'll use that approach. so that minimized our wildcats and things like that.

INTERVIEWER: Can you talk a little bit about what the situation was like for city hospital workers at the time AFSCME decided to start the organizing drive in 1965? In New York?

ROBERTS: Well, there was a union in hospitals, several unions in municipal hospitals that goes back to the forties. But there was not one single union who had the right to negotiate for the hospital workers. They didn't have collective bargaining. So in '65, the Teamsters Union, at a time when AFSCME was involved in a social service workers strike, was able to go into the hospitals, up on the wards, every shift, and signing up members, because--you have to remember the supervisors belonged to the Teamsters--the housekeepers and dieticians all were Teamster Union members. So they all worked very actively to sign up the people that we had. They really cut us very heavy, and morale was bad.

INTERVIEWER: I don't quite understand. Was AFSCME already in the hospital in some jobs?

ROBERTS: It was there, and it was the same. We had check-off, but there was no recognition of a formal structure for collective bargaining purposes. And that applied to us and the Teamsters. In order to bring that about, once they had a legal right to do so, a law was passed. They had to get thirty percent of the members signed up on a card, and then an election would be called, petition for an election. And you had to have ten percent in order to intervene....in that process.

So the Teamsters petitioned for an election. They had thirty percent of the people we negotiated in the hospitals, and we had enough to intervene but they had us outnumbered two to one. And that process went on after they had initially filed about five-and-a-half or six months. And so I was here for the strike, and then I was going to look into hospitals. It was thrust upon me rather quickly because we wanted to compete in this election, and we were already in very serious trouble.

INTERVIEWER: What strike were you here for in '65?

ROBERTS: The social service workers.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, I see. So you'd come from Illinois to work on that strike.

ROBERTS: Yes. Yes, and I was going to take a look at hospitals and see what could be done. And then they filed while I was here. So then I began to really have to work very hard: thirty-six hours in twenty-four hours. And to gather a staff. And the staff that I used was all hospital workers. We put that together in order to come up with a program that excited the people. And then to move into the election with Teamsters. We did that. And we won the election.

ROBERTS: Everything was going against us. The supervisors were bringing up our people on charges to fire them. And, of course, they were part of the Teamsters Union. And I would have to use everything that I knew to try to force the head of the hospital department at that time to be fair with us. But we hadn't--you know, we really didn't have that many teeth--it was just what I could muster. With the rules and regulations, you know, I was able to win a few things.

INTERVIEWER: Were a lot of your people fired during the campaign?

ROBERTS: There probably was a high number of firings: some of it for cause, some of it....high suspension. And the Teamsters Union would capitalize on all those things.

INTERVIEWER: What kinds of techniques did you use during the organizing? I mean, what did you do to try to convince people that you were better than the Teamsters?

ROBERTS: We had a positive program. We had a program of wages, hours, working conditions, and career ladders. And almost every worker could see himself on that ladder moving out of their jobs as they wanted to enter higher paid jobs requiring training and skills and everything. We came at a time when the mood was training, and they was seeing people all around them that was coming into the hospital being trained for jobs beyond their level. And they're not having an opportunity, although being penalized for being the poor that continued to work, and they was not entitled to upward mobility.

INTERVIEWER: Who was coming in?

ROBERTS: The people from Manpower programs.

INTERVIEWER: And New Careers Program people?

ROBERTS: Yes. Uh-huh.

INTERVIEWER: I see.

ROBERTS: So we put a stop to it....and said that the people there had a right to move up, and those who wanted in should come in and earn their way. And I petitioned for funds and couldn't get those until after an election was held. And they said that they would give us funds for training and what have you.

We developed all the programs that we wanted to have in technician categories, in nursing categories, the housekeeper category, the food service supervisor, every single area. And then we had meetings around the clock in every hospital,

ROBERTS: and we talked about the programs. First, I had to explore thoroughly with my staff and with the people I had brought out of the hospitals, to see if this reflected what they wanted. And they was all excited about it. It was really just the fulfillment of the things that I thought should happen. And I just proposed it to them, because I came out of that setting, and they loved it. And they were able to go out and say, "This is why we want to win." And they felt good about what they were saying, what they were doing. Each leaflet dealt with certain things, and educated them as to the possibility of it. We told them, and we went to Washington. We showed them the letters when we went to Washington. We reported back every single thing. We was winning some grievances, because I really came down very hard and tough, and we would report those out.

And so people felt that we was a union that could represent them for the better, and so they voted for us.

INTERVIEWER: What did the Teamsters Union do to try to counter your strategy?

ROBERTS: They would appear at the meetings, and they would get into fights to try to keep the people out of the meetings. They stabbed a couple of staff people. They turned the lights out while we were sitting meeting. And they would follow me around to harrass me. And all kinds of threats and things like that. I could have sworn that somebody shot at my window one day. And so it was a frightening experience, but it only made me angry and more determined. And I remember, I used to have a brick in my pocket. Some of their people who wanted to come over to us who were in their higher positions.... they would threaten them, and I would have to send people out to stay with them all night long to let them know they should not be bullied. So we'd sit with them and we had meetings with everybody.

And that went on. Then women would attack the men, try to kick them in the privates. Instead of them meeting to explain their program, they had no program. And we had a program. And I kept pointing that out. And they wasn't smart enough. They thought that they had it in the bag, because they had two members for every one that we had.

The Labor Department was against us. And they held the election....we were considered the weak party....when they counted the ballots that particular day I could see we were winning, because I had lived so close to it. I could almost to the, exact, how many votes I expected from each hospital. And at one hospital they [Teamsters] stood up and they marched the

ROBERTS: people in and out and I had to send forces over there. I mean it was really Gestapo tactics. Management permitted them to let all their shop stewards off, and they gave us a limited number, and they expounded on their numbers. We couldn't even get close to some of our people, because they had Teamster Union members lined up on the sides of the....and had them walking. And they was running up on the floors, and getting them off the floors and bringing them down. And it was really a horrifying experience, because you didn't know whether when they got into the booth if some of them was paid, whether we was going to make it or not.

Before that, I also told them that they were going to be wined and dined and paid, but they had their own future. They should accept their own and go in and vote for what they knew was the right thing to vote for. Because I didn't want them to feel guilty about taking it. I said, "Anybody who would give you that, you deserve it. Because they've done nothing. If they had to come here and pay you off and haven't convinced you that they're good," I says, "Then it's an insult to your intelligence. And you can pay them back by voting for yourself."

And then, this was a whole thing that I took on about a week before the election, because I knew they was going to do this. I found out all about them, so I was preparing myself. And when they counted the votes....the last group to come in--we had won the election--was Welfare Island. And we had to have police and everybody to go get our people. They had burst in, and they wanted to take the ballots away and throw them in the river, so that the election would be null and void. And they couldn't get away with it. And they was, they was really paralyzed, because they didn't expect us to win. And on a recount we picked up two hundred more votes. That goes to show you what the Labor Department was all about.

INTERVIEWER: Why do you think the Labor Department supported the Teamsters against AFSCME?

ROBERTS: Well, they were very tight with them. Russo, at that time we had in the Labor Department was very tight with the Teamsters.

INTERVIEWER: Uh-huh. And do you think that was also true with management? I mean, why would they have wanted Teamsters versus AFSCME?

ROBERTS: Because if the workers had voted for the Teamsters Union, they would not have to be bothered with any grievances, because they all belong to the same organization to a large degree.

INTERVIEWER: One of the things I'm interested in....the Teamsters....I read the New York Times--some of the Times stories about it--charged that there was a conspiracy to keep their voters away and they made all sorts of charges. Whatever happened to the charges?

ROBERTS: We'll never know. Never know after the . . .

INTERVIEWER: Were they investigated?

ROBERTS: Oh, yes. We was ten months before we ever got certified. They couldn't ascertain anything. But on a recount we just kept picking up votes.

INTERVIEWER: One of the things I was interested in is that they said in the Times articles that one-third of the eligible voters during the strike never came out.

ROBERTS: Well, that's true. That was very normal.

INTERVIEWER: People were....scared, do you think?

ROBERTS: Some of them was a little frightened. Others had their youngsters; they had to rush home. Time elements. The lines were long....it was a very difficult, very difficult, and one of the largest single campaigns that anybody could ever remember. Twenty-two thousand workers were involved in that election.

INTERVIEWER: So it's your general sense that the reason AFSCME won was, was because there was a program to offer.

ROBERTS. Yes. Yes. We really related to the needs of the people. We manifest that through a program we were positive about it, and convinced them that was the best possible solution to many of their problems.

INTERVIEWER: Did you ever think that they would just vote no agent?

ROBERTS: No. The people are too union minded here--in the city. They knew they needed an organization. No mistake about that.

INTERVIEWER: So that was . . .

ROBERTS: No, that never was a factor.

INTERVIEWER: OK. I wanted to ask a couple questions about the 1969....'68 state workers' strike. Can you start by explaining what the reasons for the strike were, and why you thought it was.... the strike was called in the first place, and why it was important?

ROBERTS: Well, a law had just been passed--the Taylor Law--which gave the state the right to have collect bargaining for the first time. And while CSEA themselves as an organization, our organization had enough members, which was a labor union organization to challenge that. And the governor refused to accept our challenge. Even after he had the law passed that penalized and everything, you know, if you struck.

So we spent one year....he had promised them, "OK, we'll let you have it in November." And I guess November came and passed, and he did nothing.

INTERVIEWER: He was going to let you have the election then?

ROBERTS: Yes. And he had been spoken to and everything, and he just would not move. And so I was asked to try to put it all together. It was bad; it was a bad scene in the state. So I began to organize them around a program. And in this particular area we had a real spirit going, but upstate it was very difficult for me, because: one, I didn't have that much time, and two, I needed to be up there like all the time with white staff because it is white upstate--Italian predominately.

INTERVIEWER: I'm from Middletown.

ROBERTS: Yeah.

INTERVIEWER: I know.

ROBERTS: And they were pretty reactionary. The national president was supposed to send me those kinds of people to give the people security and stability. The one thing you can't do is touch and run. If you ask people to join your organization, you've got to prove to them that you're there and that you're ready to take on everything. Otherwise, why should they stick their neck out and have you running, cause them to lose their job?

So our international union president had people in for awhile, then out, then somebody else in. And he was putting a lot of money into the campaign.

INTERVIEWER: Why couldn't he get people who could stay? Was there just not enough money?

ROBERTS: Well, oh yes. He had....he said he would put the money there and all. But, you see, to get labor organizers is not easy. There's not a lot of them; you got to know what you're doing.

ROBERTS: And the one thing that I wanted, I wanted was someone who carried out orders. I could map a campaign out; I had it going. But to get somebody that was stable, that understood, that had the spirit and what have you. I made several trips up there. And the people were all fired up, but they needed somebody right there to, to keep pulling their hand and checking with them, see? I had people check in and they have to give the reports. And I go out to the meetings with them. You know, I don't ask them to do nothing, you know, that I don't want to do myself. I talk to them. And to give them logic about why certain things have to happen; what their stake in it is--that you can't sit and say, "I did my part," that we are interlocked with each other. And if it goes down, we go down with it. And if it rises, we all rise, you know. You have to really let them see what the big pictures are about it, in a very basic way.

So he must have had four or five different people there, and none of them was too good. At the end I had to put people of my own in Ithaca, I mean in Utica, and Buffalo. They were in Rome, gee, I have to take a look at the chart for that one, you know.

INTERVIEWER: We're talking about a couple hundred miles . . .

ROBERTS: We're talking about the whole....Rochester, you know. I would have to look just to see, in the Middletown area.... to the left of Rockland County.

INTERVIEWER: Right.

ROBERTS: All of these areas needed people, you see. And although fifty percent of the people live right around in this area, the other bulk of them was upstate. We just couldn't....the people were all fired up, and all excited. But there was absolutely not the same kind of spirit and rallying, you know. Because they didn't have a stable person coordinating things and bringing them together. I used to have meetings every week, you know. And I had to run up there and have meetings. And in between they had to call me long distance if they wanted something. I would run up there to follow through sharpening on grievances and the things, you know, that you should do. It was very hard, very, very hard, because of the distance and all.

So I called for an election, and the president was sort of...."Well, we have to bring this to a halt." I says, "Well, then let's get the election. And let's hope that we make it. But you can't just bring it to a halt, and then walk out. You have to make your attempt to try to do something here."

ROBERTS: And so we took a real long shot, 'cause the governor didn't tell us when we was going to have the election, he didn't tell us anything. And finally we had the strike, which was very successful because we forced him to sit down that he would agree to an election.

INTERVIEWER: Can you describe a little bit what went on on the lines during the strike? First of all, how long were you out?

ROBERTS: Two weeks. About two weeks.

INTERVIEWER: And what happened on the lines during the strike?

ROBERTS: The spirits were very high. The first hospital we took was Creedmoor. It was a very spirited hospital. And the next hospital we took was, let me think . . .

INTERVIEWER: Bronx State?

ROBERTS: Yes. Bronx State. And then the next hospital was Buffalo. And then we was just about to take on Pilgrim State, and he succumbed. And we really should have gone further, because we should have forced it--the conditions and the hours, but we didn't. We permitted him to have a mail ballot, of which there was more ballots than voters. And some people never got ballots. It was terrible. So he just took the election at that time, because that was crucial. We won one unit.

INTERVIEWER: Why didn't you take all the hospitals at once? What made you choose to start the strike in one hospital and then move from one?

ROBERTS: Because we didn't really want the strike. And to take them all at once....I was always out to win, and it would have been....not having a stable force upstate, except for areas that I had put people in that was beginning to come along, like the Buffalo strike, you know....and I had to skip around. Part of my package was to try to drive them crazy. And to drive them crazy was to hit and for them not to know where you were going. And if they didn't know where you were going, then they would move patients one place and they may find out that there's a strike there. And they'd have to move 'em out again, you see? So he had to do something about that. But he was so angry with me that he couldn't wait to get me in jail, off the street. But that was the only way that we forced an election, and they been having elections ever since.

INTERVIEWER: The strike finally ended because Governor Rockefeller finally agreed to allow for the election?

ROBERTS: Yes, he did. And it took him months after that. We lost a lot of momentum. It took him six months or more, probably eight months before the election was ever held.

INTERVIEWER: The election was not until July, right? And the strike ended in December.

ROBERTS: That's right. Six months. So that hurt the momentum.

INTERVIEWER: Sure. Was it hard to organize people who were state hospital workers to go out on strike? I mean, was it....did they feel badly about it when they . . .

ROBERTS: No. They didn't. The ones who participated felt victorious and very good about it. First of all, we did win the strike. We didn't win the election; we won the strike. And we could have won the election, but the conditions did not come down the way it should have. I think I would have handled it differently if I had been calling the shots, but I wasn't--our international president was calling them, and he didn't have....I don't think he can be as tough as I if I know where I'm goin'. If I know where I'm going, I go there. I'm crazy. You have to be.

INTERVIEWER: My understanding about the strike, too, is that when--after the strike had ended there started to be reprisals against some of the workers who stayed out. And there was a meeting in the Bronx about that, and they wanted to go out on strike again.

ROBERTS: Yes. We got that resolved, though.

INTERVIEWER: My understanding....yeah. Do you think it would have been a bad idea to go out again?

ROBERTS: Yes. You see, you have to always be careful when you have a job action that there aren't hidden agendas being carried out by outsiders, or people who have another agenda that's outside.

INTERVIEWER: Uh-huh.

ROBERTS: And I always watch out for that. Because I'm not out to commit suicide either. So, even though there was problems, there was a way to handle those problems, and we did handle them.

INTERVIEWER: So did you think that the people who were pushing for a renewal of the strike were not people who were workers in the hospital?

ROBERTS: Yeah, they were workers, but they had a different agenda. They'd rather fight than win--doctors.

INTERVIEWER: Uh-huh.

ROBERTS: People who were really to the left. It wasn't the real workers.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think that if....that would have hurt your cause at that point--to go out again?

ROBERTS: Yes, it would have. Because they could not have won without the help of all the other hospitals, who was not going to join them in that nonsense, when there was another way of doing it. You see, I take a position that no one hospital, particularly when it's a state or municipal hospital, is strong by themselves. If I took and closed Sydenham on a strike, hell could freeze over. They couldn't care, particularly now that they want to close them all. But if I say that all sixteen's going to close. . . .

Well, any governmental setting where you have state and municipal hospitals....to close one is nothing. Because they would just try to absorb the patients in the balance of them. So the impact has to be a chain reaction. And they have to fear that there will be a chain reaction to close them all, because that's the way you apply the pressure. I think of it as squeezing them until they give, you know. And I have no desire to hurt patients. So you try to your impact and be effective at the same time, unless the situation gets.... sometimes you can't hold the workers back. I had a time holding 'em back, because they all wanted to go out at the same time. I had to tell them that wasn't a good strategy.

INTERVIEWER: Could you describe what happened to you during the strike?

ROBERTS: Well, I guess I was....for the first time, I had a good look at the laws and people who make laws, who make them to control you but not to live up to them themselves--who force you then to break the law and then blame you for the whole thing. That was what happened with Governor Rockefeller who was responsible for the Taylor Law. And then after the law was set, he refused to abide by the law, which forced me to then ignore the law. And then I went to jail. And nothing happened to him.

I think that was really an awakening for me--a very painful, painful thing to me. And all we wanted was the right to decide. That's all we was asking for. And he, because he was a Rockefeller, felt that that....after all you don't challenge him. It was a whole mentality thing. And nobody was really able....took him on, so he had to be taken on.

INTERVIEWER: How long were you in jail?

ROBERTS: He had me, through the judge, sentenced for a month, which was the longest sentence they had given anyone. But I was in jail for two weeks, because of the people in New York who were very outraged by it. I'm very grateful to them. They really was....they took it a lot harder than I did. And I think I felt humiliated, because I felt that I had done nothing wrong. And their contempt for me at that time, you know.... was so upset. And then he was upset about having done it. People who were....probably made it very clear to him, you know, that this was a terrible thing. So then he began to blame the leadership of the union. And I had to tell him that I was a woman who was an organizer. And I did all the things that the men did, and if I violated a law, it was me who wanted to pay that price. I didn't need anybody to pay it for me. And that was it.

INTERVIEWER: Were they thinking of making a deal so that someone like Vic or Jerry Wurf would go in jail instead of you?

ROBERTS: I think that he would have preferred that that happen. He said that those men put that woman in jail, is the way he would see it. And I saw him at least twice following that, and he always said: "What those men did to you." And I would be so insulted by that remark. I can't tell you how insulted I was.

INTERVIEWER: I can imagine.

ROBERTS: Because it was like I didn't have any sense, and I would permit myself to be used. And what he didn't understand is--not he or no one else would use me. I was the one organizing out there, and I wasn't going to step aside and let somebody else take it, because I'm a big girl. I can take whatever I put out, you know. But that was his mentality.

INTERVIEWER: Why do you think the union lost the strike? I mean, lost the vote six months later?

ROBERTS: Well, first of all, PERB [Public Employees' Review Board], who was his instrument, counted the ballots....when I asked for.... we had did a mailing to everybody in the state, and you would get six or seven thousand people who had moved around, who never received their ballot, and it would come back through the mail. And when we were counting the ballots, I wanted to see the return mail, because that played a very important part.... about people voting and what have you. And they never would show up. Our people who were watching the bags said the bags

ROBERTS: had been changed overnight. And so we knew, we had had it. You know there was different bags for different things, you see. And so we lost it. It was taken, basically, because they refused to account for the ballots. And you would have had to go to court and be in, been in court for....eternally.

INTERVIEWER: So what finally happened? Was there....did the union try to challenge?

ROBERTS: After we had walked out with just one unit, of the several units that we had there, the president of the union didn't want to go any further than that. And I was finished with my assignment. I'm just one who has to complete something and I had done my share of it, and I must say, I left the people with....I felt bad, because they deserve a union. And if it had been these down here, we could have, you know, really had some things going for us.

INTERVIEWER: Does CSEA still have units?

ROBERTS: Yes. They do.

INTERVIEWER: Has AFSCME ever tried to organize them since then?

ROBERTS: No. Well, they piddle around with it here and there, but never really follow through. You see, it's a very big undertaking. And you can't diddle with it; you really got to get down with it, you know. And you need a very good staff in about four different areas of the state. And you need to have a coordinated program, and you really got to have people who have their heart in it to go do it. It can't be a business. It's got to really be putting it out there.

INTERVIEWER: Uh-huh. How did the rank and file feel about what happened?

ROBERTS: They thought they had a beautiful campaign. They....I always made them feel very good about themselves. They felt they was on the right side. They felt that people upstate could have done more about voting, you know. And they felt that they....it had been taken away from them. See, we never wanted a mail ballot. We knew what was going to happen with that....particularly when you have your own men counting the ballots. Let's be fair about it.

INTERVIEWER: Uh-huh. Sure.

ROBERTS: So, we knew it was dirty.

INTERVIEWER: Uh-huh. I wanted to just ask two or three more background questions....that don't have to do with that strike. One is that....my understanding is that in the early fifties, in Chicago, there was a committee that was mostly people from the black community and liberal white doctors that were involved in trying to get black physicians into Cook County Hospital and into some of the bigger voluntaries, to end some of the discrimination against both black physicians in the Chicago hospitals and also against black patients and the segregation of patients. Was AFSCME involved at all in that?

ROBERTS: I doubt it very much, because I was there, but I didn't become active until the middle fifties, I guess. Very, very active at that time. And I just know that the black community was very concerned that we had only one hospital. People would die trying to get there, and none of the voluntary hospitals wanted them. And it was a real problem.

INTERVIEWER: Were black people going to Cook County Hospital then?

ROBERTS: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: And to Providence Hospital?

ROBERTS: Yes. That's the only one. And that was mostly private doctors--in Providence. Most of them would go to Cook County. Unless you had your own doctor you wouldn't go in Providence.

INTERVIEWER: Why do you think the union wasn't involved?

ROBERTS: Well, there was only one....AFSCME was very, very weak--in Chicago. And there was only one....they had a council of about two thousand people. That was it. And one local, which was University of Chicago Hospitals, which had about, more than a third of that two thousand. And so their entrance....we, we wasn't organizing, I don't think, at that particular time in hospitals. So, the interest may not have been there. And there was no law, by the way, giving them the right to organize. It was very difficult without a law, because we went into that organization where we lost, because there was no law. We had the people, but that was it. They would rather close the hospitals, and they work together as a group in support of each other than to permit organization.

INTERVIEWER: Did AFSCME start to have more....I mean one of the things about hospital organizing is that the....it's always been very much tied, especially in the sixties, to the civil

INTERVIEWER: rights movement. Do you think that that was also true of AFSCME in its organizing of hospitals in the sixties? If not true in the fifties?

ROBERTS: Well, my experience, and I organized in the sixties--this was when I organized white workers. And that was the last thing that I could be talking about in the civil rights movement. I just talked about the workers' rights, more than anything else. And I think that might have made it difficult for me, because there was so much happening with blacks during that time that there was a little fear in the people I was trying to organize. And when you think of it, it was....I was almost an affront to them, but we learned to love each other, in spite of all those things.

INTERVIEWER: Did you ever think about, in those days in the sixties, about leaving the union and going to work in civil rights work instead?

ROBERTS: I have always seen the union as a protector of the working class' rights that transcend all the other things. When you get into things that are....border on color, you lose part of your support right away. But when you can get a class of people to see that their interests is basically the same, you got far more clout. Because I happen to think that this society works very hard at keeping the classes divided by means of color. And, therefore, they really don't truly express themselves in a very democratic way, for their own well-being. This is where democracy is working; yet it's not working. Now, I mean, that my analysis of it. And, therefore, I have always seen the labor movement as a beautiful instrument. If I was working with the NAACP, how much could I do? All right? I'm outside. I'm not changing the lot that one has. I'm not, don't have a force to deal with political parties within the community. I don't have any of the very things that make up our society. But if I work in the labor movement with people who have one common thing in common--and that is their labor, their work, being paid for their work and getting the most out of their work--well then I have a larger group. And they began to understand that we do have a common interest in making this whole society.

INTERVIEWER: Did you think that the union, in addition to that, should get, should have gotten more involved in civil rights' issues during the sixties? Or did the union get involved?

ROBERTS: Our union was pretty active. We went on all the marches, and contributed pretty heavily. There's only so much one can do. I'm one who feels that you should support good things, but they should not dominate your organization,

ROBERTS: because you have your own thrust. And sometimes it is not politically smart. But you certainly should support good things...and leave room for other people. You can't do everything well. You can only do some things well.

INTERVIEWER: I had just really one final, final question to ask you, which is that one of the things that you talked about last time was how much time and energy the union takes from your life. Where do you think your sources of support come from? You know, just to keep going every day, what kind of support do you get in your life?

ROBERTS: What really makes me feel good is, I have to move. I have to see progress. The more progress I see, the more I want to work toward change, because it's hope for me. And the more I see in people's faces, you know, just a little appreciation that they know what I'm trying to do. That's the motivating thing for me. I mean, not many people can feel appreciated. And I feel somewhat appreciated among the people that I represent, because they're so beautiful. And they've given me an opportunity to live. And so I think that's what keeps me going, and I feel a real, real responsibility for that, that I can't let them down, and that I always got to be there, that I've got to be on the ball, you know.

And sometimes I get very tired, and really you need some.... a few days off, maybe so I can rejuvenate myself. Just fresh ideas, and not feel so punch drunk. Because it is.... a struggle, and one needs that.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think that the union interfered with your ever having more of a personal life outside the union?

ROBERTS: I think so. Because every waking moment in a union you are sort of in a fishbowl. And I really don't enjoy taking a fellow that I like around to be scrutinized. And people look at you very, very carefully. Everything that I do, I'm sure, is examined by the members, maybe overtly, and I don't know how to go about doing this; it's quite a responsibility. And I never want to do anything that I think is going to embarrass them. And yet, I want to be me, you know. And so, my personal life, I make it my personal life. I don't do anything that I feel I have to hide, you know, I'm that kind of person. And 'cause I think that, because I'm living almost fourteen hours a day with the union, in that whatever happens is, whatever I am is so easily identified by them because they see me almost all of my waking, working, you know, waking life. And that places a burden on me.

ROBERTS: It's not like a, a movie star or politician who may have fixed hours. It goes far beyond....lot of meetings in the evening, a lot of social things, you know, where you have a drink with them, and so on. And you have to make sure that you're not going to be getting drunk, which I don't do anyway. I like a drink, but I could never feel comfortable getting drunk, nor would I ever humiliate myself or them by doing that.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think it's harder being a woman in those situations than being a man? I mean that, to recreate a personal life in the sense that a lot of men will have wives who accept that in a way that I think would be harder for a woman.

ROBERTS: I think that it would be very hard for a husband of mine. I think it would be impossible for him, and I have to decide whether he means more than the people do. And I wouldn't want to subject the best man to it. It's a tough life, and I like being cuddled like any woman likes to be cuddled. Everybody likes to be loved; that's a very normal thing, particularly after I get beat up so much during the day, and I beat up a few people. But it's nice to be able to share some warm moments with somebody you care about, very nice, you know.

But I don't think that I'm as tolerant. I don't think that I want to hear any bullshit, you know what I mean? And I don't, I don't want him bothering me or fencing me and all that. I just....and that's selfish probably, because I just want to be more relaxed and want him to understand what I'm going through. And sometimes he's going through the same thing, so I have to always be sort of aware of that. I'm not going to be selfish in my personal life although I have such a struggle.

And I think being a woman in this job is much harder than a man, because almost everybody I meet in the business world sooner or later takes me to the mat, because I am a woman--because they don't want to take me serious. So then I got to go and let them know I can handle myself as well as he can, and, "Don't play with me. I'm not here to be played with." And that's tough. I have to be all, almost ready to fight more than the average man. And that's a tragedy. And I think it would have been far more difficult since the women's awareness of themselves, than it's ever been, because they feel so threatened.

So if I come in, I'm just a threat by being there, you know. And being a black woman hasn't been easy either. And many times I know what they're thinking. And I don't want to say

ROBERTS: what they're thinking, because it's impolite to do it. Maybe he wants to hide it, maybe he'll learn a little something after he gets to know me. And so you have all these....different pieces that you got to put in place in the whole process. But it has been a very beautiful experience for me. I don't think I'd have it any other way. Just to observe people.

And I think that if you would talk to a lot of the men that I deal with, we have a healthy respect for each other. Frequently when they leave the city and go elsewhere they always write letters to me. They always glad to see me; it's like we were real friends. And we might have been fighting like cats and dogs, you know? And I think it's because they like what I stand for in a way. I try not to be nasty, but I'm tough.

INTERVIEWER: Uh-huh.

ROBERTS: I believe that you can't be half right. If you feel that you're right that you've got to be as strong about that as a person who's wrong who's taking advantage of you. And if you're not willing to do that, don't even bother. The stakes are so great for my organization, for people I represent, that I just can't let go. I just can't, you know. I think that it costs them too much for me to sit and let things slide by. We have to be sure that the "i's" are dotted and the "t's" are crossed, because the little small things mean so much to the people who have so little. And so it makes it very difficult.

INTERVIEWER: Was it hard on your children, do you think?

ROBERTS: I think, perhaps it was. You must remember that they were my nephews and niece. And my mother who's been with me was a very good mother. And I sort of am like a....the one who goes out and make a living and come home. And I'll hear things, and my mother, who's seventy-two years old, sometimes doesn't quite understand them. And well, I'll have to mediate a situation.

They live and die with me in a way. When I went to jail it was very hard on them. They thought I was being taken away from them, and you know....they lost their mother and they don't know where their father is. So, it's been a bit hard on 'em.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think that they've basically supported what you've done, though?

ROBERTS: Oh, yes. I think they're very proud. They don't tell me that, but they talk about it, you know. Yeah, yeah. I think they're pretty proud. I never like to say too much. And it depends on the child. The older one, I think, is very proud--I think all three of them in their own way, very much so. It's hard for children to compete, too, you know. And whenever they feel that you've done well, then they just come along. So....but I think that they all have hearts, too. They are....my mother is a very religious woman.

So the principles that we live by are there. And they have them. Sometimes very naive, because they haven't quite learned how cruel that old world is out there, but that's healthy. They intelligent; they learn fast. A few kicks don't hurt anybody, you know?

INTERVIEWER: No. You learn.

ROBERTS: And that it means that you still don't have to generalize and be bitter towards one because you have a negative experience. Anybody who does that is not too bright, and they can't handle, you know, meeting people like that.

If I meet people, I don't paint them all the same. I think that's a stupid thing to do. And I, I try to assess what they're all about.

INTERVIEWER: Thanks.

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