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

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Oral History Interview

with

DOLLY LOWTHER ROBINSON

Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America

by

Bette Craig

Program on Women and Work

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DOLLIE LOWTHER ROBINSON

A native of Elizabeth City, North Carolina, Dollie Lowther Robinson's initial union involvement came as a laundry worker in Brooklyn, after she finished Girls' High School there. Although she was attending night school at Brooklyn College, Robinson made time for union activities. She held the positons of shop steward and secretary of her local and later became education director (to Bessie Hillman) of the Laundry Workers Joint Board, of the Amalgamated Clothing Workers of America [ACWA].

After her experiences with the Laundry Workers, Robinson was hired as an organizer for the ACWA, organizing, among others, shirt workers in Alabama and Florida. Despite an obviously full schedule, Robinson also pursued a law degree during this time.

In addition to her work in the ACWA, Robinson organized for the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees [AFSCME] and the Service Employees International Union [SEIU]. In New York she worked for the hospital unit of AFSCME, organizing medical and psychiatric social workers for the first time.

Throughout her career Robinson has been very active with political organizations. She was the only woman to sit with forty-two men on the Brooklyn-based Pioneer Civic Association. Robinson later served as treasurer for the short-lived American Labor Party in Kings County, New York.

This union activist has also held several governmental appointments. In New York, she served as Secretary of Labor for two years, and as Equal Employment Opportunity Officer. During the Kennedy Administration she was assistant to the director of the Women's Bureau, and was sent as labor representative to the African Trade Fair.

Currently, Robinson sits on the board of the Small College, a unit of Brooklyn College.

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July, 1976
New York City, New York

By Bette Craig

ROBINSON: I was born in a little town, Elizabeth City, North Carolina, in a year unknown to anyone. If we start knowing that I'm thirty-six, and that I have been for a number of years, that's out of the way. My father was a Navy man for thirty years and my mother was a housewife in the South. We came to Brooklyn, New York--I think in 1930 we did--so that gives you some idea. I went to Girls High [School] and finished Girls' High and then found a job. The only job I could find at that time, that the girls found for me, was in a laundry. And I became a laundry worker. Then, after working in the laundry for a summer, since I had finished the Girls' High School, we decided that I'd continue working there because the employer man wanted to keep me on the job. We were not organized at that time, thus we were working I think as many as seventy-two hours a week for six dollars a week. But we decided that I'd go to evening college. The girls would wash my skirt and blouse and I would work and then rush off to college in the evening. I became interested in organizing because I met people who were talking about organizing, and they asked me to help; and although I was the youngest one there, I was active, and I was big, and I was interested, and I talked.

Thus, we began. There was a woman organizing laundry workers, the woman who really started the laundry union with even people in her home. Her name was Charlotte Adelman. She was the first person I met that was a Garveyite,* but she was very vocal and very hard-working and

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* Follower of Marcus Garvey, the West Indian who founded the "Back to Africa" movement.

ROBINSON: very honest person, and the workers believed her. So, she contracted a number of us, and with the help of the Women's Trade Union League, because they helped her, they started organizing laundry workers. This was around '36 and '37 that they started that organization. It was slow, but a determined effort, and I believe she went to all of the organizations for help. She went to the ILG [International Ladies Garment Workers] and they did not take them in, they did not want them, and finally they found someone in the Amalgamated [Clothing Workers of America] who decided that they would help them and give them a hand. There was a strike, and the strike was at the laundry I was working in--the Colonial Laundry. And great help for that strike was given by [Mayor] LaGuardia, who turned off the water, and they couldn't wash the clothes in the laundry. After much struggle and everything, they were able to begin the union.

And it was interesting, at that time, that I never realized how protective the people in that shop were of me, because it seemed that they always gave me something to do away from the place when there was going to be an arrest. So that every time I came back, there was an arrest before I got back, or just after I left, or something. They were very protective. And yet, you know, you were an aristocrat of the movement if you could get arrested. I realized only years later, very many years later, how protective they were of me. But they formed the union, and it became the Laundry Workers Joint Board.

The first head of the Laundry Workers Joint Board was Noah Walter. Noah Walter was the person who had the know how. I think Noah got his training in the socialist movement, he and Frank Crosswaithe.* Noah was the person chosen first to lead that movement. He was an excellent person, an excellent leader. He was the first head of it. And then, [Louis] Simon,** who is still the Secretary-Treasurer, was one of those people. Many of the other leaders--Charlotte is not

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* An ILGWU activist who founded the Harlem Labor Union.

** Present manager of the Amalgamated Service and Allied Industries, formerly the Laundry Workers Joint Board of the ACWA.

ROBINSON: in the movement; she is retired. She left the movement some years ago, even before retirement. She stayed with it many years, oh yes, many years. She was one of those very hard fighters for workers' rights. I mean, she was a very vocal person, very hard fighting. Being a Garveyite, she was very much interested in the black workers, and all workers. She would win elections by an overpowering number of votes. I don't care who they put against her, or what methods they used, she would win those elections as the strong person. And, with proper guidance, probably never would have been out of the union. But, some people seeing strength, the weaklings hang on and tear down the strength. But she was an excellent leader, really a great woman. And I know many of us owe a great deal to her, because she was the one that really preached trade unionism to us.

INTERVIEWER: Did Noah Walter work in the laundry, too?

ROBINSON: Noah probably had worked in the laundry, although I think he probably had finished college; I'm not sure. But there was no work anyplace, so I'm sure that he probably worked in the laundry. And most of the people who were there, I mean all of them, had worked in the laundry. So I'm sure he had, at some time. But he was chosen because of his advanced knowledge and because of his training in the Socialist Party. Because he was a member of the Socialist Party. That's funny, I hadn't thought of these people in a long time.

INTERVIEWER: Were they mostly women?

ROBINSON: No, Charlotte was the only woman. Charlotte was the only woman and she was the strong one. She was strong. Strength. And as I remember her, it was years ago, and to prove that she was strong, she wore a shirt and tie. And she had her hair, before the Afro came in, she had her hair short, and she wore those felt hats. This was to prove her strength. But she was strong, and she was the woman. She was the only woman in that organization and the others were men.

INTERVIEWER: How about the people in the laundries? Were they mostly women?

ROBINSON: Women, of course. Mostly women. They were mostly women. Let's see, I started after the organization. I became one, the usual position, I was shop steward of my shop. Then I became secretary of my local, and then assistant

ROBINSON: educational director. Mrs. Hillman was the educational director.* Mrs. Hillman was from the Amalgamated and she was placed in the Laundry [Workers Joint Board] to help them. She was very good because she was a very warm individual. And had a wonderful accent. You would think that everybody would be very antagonistic toward the accent, but they weren't. They loved her. One, because she was warm. She was honest to a fault. Whatever she felt, she would tell you. Everyone began to understand that and to appreciate it, you know, because she would tell you if she thought you were wrong or right, and you knew where she stood. So, she was a great person to have around. She was the [education] director and prior to that they had Roberta DeMarr as her assistant. When she left, I was given the job as her assistant.

INTERVIEWER: What year was this?

ROBINSON: Oh, gosh, I don't know. Maybe '40, '41. Maybe '41 or '42. 1941. Probably '41. '42. Yep, could be.

INTERVIEWER: Did Bessie Hillman help in organizing in Laundry [Workers Joint Board] or was she doing education work?

ROBINSON: She helped in organizing, too. Yes. Everyone was organizing. I mean if you were doing education work, it was only a form of organizing and helping. And, we used to say that we wanted to touch the worker from the cradle to the grave, so those were activities that were carried on through parents and things of that sort. And then we organized the educational department to give activities that workers didn't have--lessons to their children, music lessons because many of the children wanted to play instruments. The union purchased the instruments and they used them. And one of the highlights would be the little orchestra. And they were taught piano lessons.

The interesting part about that, too, one of the teachers who really organized the music room was Mrs. Tuvin, who was Judy Holliday's** mother. And Tuvin means holiday [in Yiddish], so that's how Judy got the name. But, anyway, she was one of them. She was a teacher. We had them [classes] at 160 Fifth Avenue, we had classes there, and

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* Bessie Abramowitz Hillman, a leader of the 1910 Chicago strike at Hart, Schaffner and Marx Company. Married Sidney Hillman, the first president of ACWA, and continued to be active in the union.

** An actress and movie star.

ROBINSON: we had classes in Brownsville, in the area that Charlotte Adelman came from. And those youngsters in Brownsville were tremendously helped by this educational program. On campus now [at Brooklyn College] is a youngster, a young woman, who was in that music class. She was a very small, a very petite youngster, very tiny, and she wanted to blow a horn. That's all she knew. She wanted to blow a horn. We wanted her to play a little tambourine. "No, I want to blow a horn." And we gave her that, and each year people would come to hear June Campbell play that horn, because she was really tremendous. She's here on campus. She finished Small College, a program at Brooklyn College, that I'm connected with too, a couple of years ago. Now she's working on campus. And that's a former laundry worker's child, a member of the school. It's great to see them. So, we had those activities and we organized.

Some of the things we did for the Blood Bank, you know, during the war. Which war, you can guess. But, anyway we were getting blood. And, it was difficult, especially, to get blood from blacks. Because, at this time there was separation of blood. But I was on that team. Mrs. Hillman, Esther Peterson* and I were working. Esther from the National Office, Mrs. Hillman and I. But we were on the national committee to get blood for the Red Cross. And it was one of the hardest assignments you could have. But we managed to do that assignment. But I always liked this story because Mrs. Hillman was to go to Washington to meet with the Red Cross and Dr. Channing Tobias** was to be here from the NAACP. So, I said, "Mrs. Hillman, will you tell them just how hard it is for me to get blood from black workers with all of this separation of blood?" And she said, "Dawye," that's what she said, "Dawye," she never said, "Dollie", she said, "Dawye, let somebody else do it." I said, "They won't do it, you do it." As she was going out the door, I said, "If you'll do this, you'll be a real martyr." And the door closes, and she comes back and she opens the door. She says, "But, Dawye, I don't know whether I want to be a martyr." But to end that story, the minutes show that the person who first brought it [segregation of blood] up for discussing was Bessie Hillman at that meeting. It just shows you just what she was, "I don't know

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* Staff member, ACWA Education Department, later a lobbyist in Washington, D.C., for the union.

** Officer of NAACP.

ROBINSON: whether I want to be a martyr, but if Dollie says I must say it, I'm going to say it." And she told them how hard it was for us to get blood from laundry workers and with workers in other shirt factories and things of this sort. Things like that made me know that whatever she did, she did it from her heart. This woman had nothing in her but straightforwardness. And this was great. She was that way with the Amalgamated people, she told them what she had on her mind. She told everyone. She was a great woman.

Do you realize that in the Laundry Workers Joint Board, we had 30,000 workers. We had 30,000 workers. Do you know that today they have less than 6,000. Well, between 6,000 and 8,000. Let's say that, we'll be generous. Now, see, that is not, well, what can we say, unions have to keep up with the times. Of course, various things came in--the laundromats, I guess, washing machines. But, you've got to branch out. There must be other areas that you can get to really bring in and to keep the membership up. Because, to me, it's sad. To me, it's sad to see an industry go down. I mean, it's good background for, really, progress, and to have 8,000 members. That's something, that's some drop.

INTERVIEWER: And the medical center is hardly used anymore. Half of it is closed up and the lights are turned off.

ROBINSON: You're kidding. Isn't that sad. To me that is sad. But you know what it is. There was no young-blood thinking. There was no young leadership. You know what I tell them--it's half in jest--those people who had children and they wanted to build an empire for them, you know, who really believed in the movement, would have kept building a union. But they don't have children. If they don't have children, they say, "I'm building toward my retirement." This will last through my lifetime, and I'll retire, right? If you have children you want to build something for your children, I think. All of them are not going to be doctors and lawyers. One will be in the labor movement and they'll keep it moving. Now, that's facetious, but it's true, it's true. They've got to keep building. The young leadership. You shouldn't mind if it's vocal; you shouldn't mind if they fight. I mean, try to keep them with you and do something. Now, a health center that's not being used, with all of the medical problems that you have, they have enough retirees to keep it going. Ah, that's sad. You mean it's closed off, half of it's closed off?

INTERVIEWER: Yes, like rooms; doors are shut and lights are out. But they're trying to open it up to other unions so that other unions will use it too, spread it out.

ROBINSON: They should work hard at that. They should really work hard at that. It's sad. That's too bad. You make me want to go over and talk to them, go over and talk to them. I go over to their scholarship fund luncheons; they call. I'm very concerned about the leadership that they've developed. They really didn't develop leadership, and that's too bad. Worthwhile people, you had so many people in it. But, anyhow, I still love that movement. You can't get away from the fact that this is the best beginning ground for people. It really is, where their livelihood is.

INTERVIEWER: You have children I understand.

ROBINSON: Yes, I have one daughter, Jan. Jan. Jan is my little one. She's twenty-four now. I don't think that she--first of all, I really didn't want to take her to the meetings, and she was always pulling, "Let's go home, let's go home." I didn't realize she was picking up so very much about the whole movement and feel of people. I never carried her out on picket lines, but I went to Africa--the government sent me to Africa--and I left her. My mother was living but I had a friend, Bernice Fisher, who was a tremendous organizer. Bernice was a WASP who didn't have any feeling about anything but right and wrong. So, she was in charge of Jan. And I got all of these letters: "Mommy, Bunnie and I were in Albany to the Teachers' [Union] mobilization." Jan was all of nine or ten. "Bunnie and I were picketing City Hall." I hadn't had her on a picket line. "Bunnie and I....," I said, "Listen, I'd better go back before Bunnie has my child arrested."

But the other great thing about it, Mrs. Hillman was Jan's godmother. When Jan was born, Mrs. Hillman said to me, "What is it you people," (and you never worried about Mrs. Hillman's "you people," because she'd say it for everyone. It had no racial connotation. It was "you people," and she meant "you people.") "What is it you people do when children are born? Do you take them to church?" I said, "Yes. They christen them." She said, "We're gonna do that." "I haven't been to church in years," I said. "Well, we're gonna do that," she said.

ROBINSON: So then I have to go and get my good friend, Dr. Gardner Taylor,* and tell him that Mrs. Hillman is insisting that Jan is to be christened and she's standing up with her. So, he says, "All right." So, Jan was christened with Mrs. Hillman as godmother. And she took the role of godmother very seriously, and she was very close to her. And she had her at her beach home every summer. And Jan thought, "My Godmother Bessie is rich. She owns a whole beach." But, they were very close and very good. So, Jan now is field Director for the Girl Scouts in Queens. Hoping to go on to Columbia [University] in, we think she's going in for the Business Administration. She has that Polyscience Grant from Donna Shalala** for Polyscience. That's a doctoral program. And Michael Adler*** has offered this Business Administration. So, she's torn between the two. And she writes well, and I always hoped that she would continue to write.

INTERVIEWER: And she's married?

ROBINSON: She married early, too early for me. But she married when the young man finished Princeton in 1972. They were married. She went to Princeton. She was one of the first girls in. That Redbook article was very popular that she wrote, "Princeton Chose Me." She writes very well, and I wish she would write more. They all know Jan because I would leave a job if you weren't interested in Jan. I got awfully angry with Esther Peterson because she was always telling me about her children and she never asked me about Jan when I was in Washington. I said, "Listen, until you ask me about Jan, I'm not interested in hearing anything about yours." I've enjoyed her. You know, you say you love your children anyway, but I like her. You know, I love her and like her. She's a nice human being. She's always after me about my weight. She's a size five and I look at her and say, "You look ill to me." But, she's determined; she said she'd never be chubby. So, she just decided not to be. Yes, Jan is married. I have one child.

INTERVIEWER: You said you stopped working at the Amalgamated when Jan was born?

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* Pastor of Concord Baptist Church in Brooklyn, New York.

** Professor at Columbia University and now Assistant Secretary of Housing and Urban Development in the Carter Administration.

*** Professor of Business Administration at Columbia University.

ROBINSON: Yes, I was organizing. Oh, I did several jobs with the Amalgamated, educational director for the Laundry Workers, and national representative for the Amalgamated. I organized shirt workers in Montgomery, Alabama, and shirt workers in Florida with Pete Zuber.* We were stationed in Florida. The Alabama stint was very interesting because it was a shirt factory, and I wanted to organize that factory.

INTERVIEWER: Which one was it?

ROBINSON: I'm trying my best. I will think of it as I go along.

INTERVIEWER: Was that one that Frieda Schwenkmeyer was involved in?

ROBINSON: Frieda was there earlier, but it was the same factory. I followed her, and picked up some leadership there, I guess a couple of years after her. Fanny Neal was one of the leaders I chose from that factory. But in order for me to really get into that factory, I met a lawyer, Sanders, I'm sure his name was Sanders, and he was the lawyer in charge of this and I was interested in law school. So, I got to him and I explained to him that I really was from the South, that I wasn't from up North. I was from the South and they knew that I couldn't organize that factory because they didn't really want me to organize. So he felt that he was doing something for a Southerner. So, he was gonna help me to look better than the others had looked. I had to clean his old law office, looking at each book, cleaning and talking and all that, but he was helpful, very helpful.

The other thing. We're jumping around. While I was with the laundry workers, I explained to them that since my work was at night, educational work--you could only do it when workers were off--so that I did not have to come in at 9 in the morning, but maybe 12 noon. And our activities began after work. Thus, that I was thinking of going to law school. So, they told me, of course, that was all right. And they were going to be very helpful. And then I got an assignment. I was going to law school. I had to be in law school at 9 a.m.

But they started organizing a laundry in Brooklyn, and I was given that assignment. Which meant that I had to be at the plant at 4:30 in the morning. Then, I would go at 4:30 in the morning to open the picket line, leave at 8 o'clock to go to class, 9 o'clock class, and then go to the union office at 12 noon to work until the activities were over.

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* Organizer for ACWA from Watervliet, New York.

ROBINSON: So, I became friendly with the Italians in the area where I was working, and I would do their income taxes for them. At the street end was a store, and there was a large Italian woman that they called Mama, and she had this big table and she served meals and everything, and she found out that I did income tax forms. She asked me to do some. She also asked me to fill out blanks for immigration. People that they were getting to come over. So, I used to do that because I was doing income tax forms at the union anyway and filling out the immigration [forms]. And then she said that the plant I was organizing was Little Augie's plant. He was one of the, you know, bad guys in Brooklyn. But she said to me that they would open the picket line for me in the morning if I would do this work. That was tremendous. Opened the picket line and I'd get there, do my things, make the workers walk around with the picket line. Then I explained to them I had to have some [membership] cards. That I was out there and organizing, and organizing you have to have some cards. "You'll get some cards." So, I got some cards. And that went on till I had to have more cards. The end of that story is that we got the cards, but not the workers; I mean not the shop. It was an impossible situation from the beginning, that we could never, you couldn't do it because it was a controlled shop. So, they didn't get that shop, or anything. But that was how I got started in my law work. And I went to law school and I finished.

INTERVIEWER: Before your daughter was born?

ROBINSON: I finished law school the June that my daughter was born in July. I was that big. At that time it was not usual. Now kids are walking all over the campuses, but I finished in June and she was born in July. And that was Jan Robinson.

INTERVIEWER: And you did it while you were working full time?

ROBINSON: Oh, sure. Yes, I was working in Florida, too. And I came back and finished my law school. When I was coming back home this way, they said I couldn't fly after seven months. So, I came back, finished the work that I had and got my degree in June.

INTERVIEWER: You must have been tired and ready for a rest.

ROBINSON: Actually, I didn't know. I didn't know. I have an awful lot of energy. First of all, I'm a person I need five hours of sleep or four. I need five hours of sleep and that's that. And I'm a night person, you see, so that it really didn't dawn on me. I realize now that I had an awful lot of energy. This kid that I have here from Africa tells me that I go, go, go. [A seven-year old son of long-time family friends visiting from Liberia.] But, we did that. Jan was born and then I took time out.

INTERVIEWER: How long?

ROBINSON: A year, two or three years maybe. And that's when I began riding her around the street and looking to see what was happening in the neighborhood.

INTERVIEWER: Did you live in Brooklyn then?

ROBINSON: I still live at the same place, 3 Agate Court, Brooklyn. So that old timers or new timers always find me there. We go away for the summer, but that's the old homestead, a brownstone in Brooklyn. On a court where the children have grown up, the grandchildren are coming back, and it's great to see them. It's a perfect street for rearing children, because it's a dead end, and only twenty houses on the block. So, it's a perfect place.

INTERVIEWER: Do you remember your grandparents?

ROBINSON: No. My grandparents were dead. I never knew my grandparents. My mother's father died a few days before her first child was born.

INTERVIEWER: How many are in your family? How many brothers and sisters?

ROBINSON: I have none. My mother had three children. Two died prior to my birth and I was born ten years after the second one died. One lived nine months and one lived four years. But I was an only child; I was reared as an only child. My father's mother died before I was born. I knew aunts and uncles from his side, but my mother had only one brother.

INTERVIEWER: Who is the relative who's Eric's family? [the seven-year old visitor.]

ROBINSON: These are not relatives. Eric's grandmother is the granddaughter of King, one of the presidents of Liberia. She came here with a seventeen-month old child, in some confusion in the country, and I kept that child. My mother and I took care of that child, Joyce. Joyce now is doing her doctoral work at Columbia, married with a four-year old, Sahe. Eric is Joyce's sister's child, and she is a pharmacist. She's in medical school, but she came here for ten days of vacation with Eric. So these are my African family, my adopted African family. And I've had many years of great fun with them.

INTERVIEWER: Why did your family decide to come to New York.

ROBINSON: I think probably, my mother. Well, my father was retiring from the Navy, and my mother had lived in the North, in New York, for some years, and she wanted to come back. She felt the educational opportunities were good, and it was the Depression period, and she thought there would be more of a chance for her to make some money. But it was a rough period then, I think, the 1930's. So she came here, and we settled in Brooklyn. We were between Asbury Park in the summer and Brooklyn. And, my father was in Brooklyn, Asbury Park, and he liked Philadelphia. So, he chose three cities. And he was full of wanderlust--that Navy. But he was Navy through and through. Because when he retired, he came back to the little town of Elizabeth City [North Carolina]. And they'd just had lights put in, electric lights. The lights at the plant were always going off, and he was the only one who could fix them. So, they were always looking for him when the lights went out in the city. And he came back to the city, stayed awhile, did calisthenics with the young men in the State Normal School. We had a State Normal School at Elizabeth City. He did that. And then he'd come back to New York or Philadelphia and that's the way we lived. But, I thought I was Navy until I got up here and I found out there were two Navies. I was out saluting that flag and the flag pole every holiday. He knew holidays that I've never seen before. And he had that flag pole up and I was a little one out there with him saluting that flag. But, it was an interesting life.

My mother worked when she came here, yes. I thought that she was one of the best cooks in the world. She said that she thought maybe second best. She worked steady and then she had that thirty dollars a month from the Navy that sort of kept her a little independent, you know. But she could get work; I guess she could get work in the household field. And then I guess there were tight times when she wasn't working.

INTERVIEWER: I would think that with your father being away a lot, in the Navy, that she must have gotten used to being an independent woman.

ROBINSON: She did. She was a hairdresser you see, in Elizabeth City. She took up hairdressing. She did the hair in Elizabeth City. There was a State Normal School, so you had teachers getting their hair done. So, that was what I was brought up seeing her do in the South. Washing hair, and then I learned to shampoo, so I'd shampoo. But, that's what she did; but she was always doing something. I remember, at seventy years old, she took up upholstering. In my house now there are two chairs that she did from scratch. And I keep them. She was that type of individual, and she would do things. But, she was an independent person, no doubt about it.

INTERVIEWER: Was she ever involved in any community or political activity?

ROBINSON: No, she was at home. She stayed at home. But the interesting thing about it, I realized, she died in 1968. I was telling someone that I realized that I hadn't made many decisions in my life. I was one of those people, I'd come down to breakfast and I'd say, "You know what they want me to do now, oh so-and-so, and so-and-so." And she'd say, "What?" And then I'd give her the background material, and say so-and-so, and tell her, and then I'd dash off to work or wherever I was going. And then I'd come back, maybe a couple of days, and she'd fix a meal, and we'd be sitting talking. She'd say, "You know, I was thinking about that, and I would do so-and-so, and so-and-so." And I'd say, "That's just what I'm going to do!" She was smart that way. She read a lot. Especially the newspapers. And she read every column that they wrote. There was one column that a girl wrote in the Amsterdam News. And she'd read that, and she'd say so many things. And the girl used to call her. She'd say, "Miss Dora, what did you think of my column?" And she'd say, "Oh, I don't think you should have said that about that young man." So, when she passed, they put the headline: "Miss Dora is Dead." And then the girl wrote that she couldn't call her for criticism of her column anymore. But she was a homebody. She was seventy years older than my child, and yet there was no gap between them. There was no generation gap between them. They understood each other perfectly. They talked. She went and she took her to school. When the limousine picked up the child, my mother sat with her and everything. She trained her very well. She's a very well-trained child.

INTERVIEWER: Did you live with your mother?

ROBINSON: Yes, in this home at Agate Court. She was the ruler of that roost. And it is very interesting that, I guess, young people today rebel a lot. But that was her home. Though my money bought it, it was her home, it was in her name; she ruled it. Whatever she wanted was done. My home in Washington, D.C. was my home, you see, and it was very well-respected.

INTERVIEWER: Did she keep on working?

ROBINSON: No. She stopped working, I guess, at sixty-five. She didn't work after sixty-five. She wasn't working a few years before Jan was born. And wasn't feeling too well prior to Jan's birth. After Jan was born, she was not ill any more. She took her to school. She took her to nursery school. She did everything, you know. She was really alert and alive.

INTERVIEWER: She must have felt that she was really needed and had to spring up to the occasion.

ROBINSON: And did. And she did. She was a pretty wonderful thing that way. She had patience. She would listen, but she was very firm. She was a disciplinarian, too. She was firm and, therefore, Jan was very well-trained.

INTERVIEWER: What kinds of things did you do when you came to New York? What kinds of things did the city offer you that you didn't find in Elizabeth City?

ROBINSON: Well, it was a new world for me. Because Elizabeth City was a small town. I can tell you how new it was. I was on the beach at Asbury Park and they were talking about the South and how horrible it was, and about lynchings and things of this sort, and I turned to my cousin and I said to her, "Where is this place?" And she said, "A few miles from where you came from." I mean, the point is this: the South to me was a happy place. I enjoyed my childhood there. And, evidently, our town was a fairly good town. I played with whites there. I didn't know. I just didn't know, you didn't know. And I wasn't aware, I guess. Elizabeth City was a nice place, wonderful place and town. And then I came here, and I was supposed to be in a place of opportunity. And I was to take advantage

ROBINSON: of it if I could. And that's that. I was at the playing stage. I played a lot. And school was interesting. I didn't have problems with school. But, we had to work. Because the money wasn't there, and much as it should be, even if we had the thirty dollars [monthly allowance from the Navy].

INTERVIEWER: Did you have jobs that you did when you were in school?

ROBINSON: Yes, I was very lucky. In school, I had a very thick Southern accent when I came up. I don't know what accent I have now, but I had a teacher--I was trying to think of her--who was very friendly, and she was an English teacher and she had a sister who was an invalid, and she asked me what was I doing. And I told her I was looking for a job after school. And she said, "I'll give you a job reading to my sister. It'll help your Southern accent." I told her once that I really wanted to talk fast like the people in the North, that I didn't want to talk slow. She said, "It'll help your Southern accent, and we'll pay you." What did they give me, three dollars? So they did. I went and I read to her, and I know what I read, Henry Esmond, I remember. And we discussed it. It was a book she had required. And we talked about it, and that was the first....

And then when I finished high school, they were all getting jobs. So, I went. My marks were better than these kids that I saw coming for jobs. When I went there, the Director of the Urban League tells me, "Your mother has to be on relief for you to get this job." I went home and I told my mother, "If you'll go down and go on relief, I can get this job." She said, "You'll never get that job. We will never go on relief." Proud woman. She wouldn't. So, I didn't get the job. They were getting jobs, I guess, in what was that first thing that Roosevelt had out for them--the WPA or something? But, I couldn't get a job, and that's how I landed in a laundry. Right?

Then, I had one ambition. To get the Urban League. You know how young people are? I mean, this is really true, I had one ambition. I mean, here I was, my average was better, but I couldn't get a job because my mother wouldn't go on relief. The people I saw, I thought they had much more money that we had, and I couldn't imagine them being on relief. So, I didn't believe the Urban League, right? I didn't believe. Then, I'm becoming aware, see, I didn't believe. But, they're doing it to me because of this, that, or one reason. But, I worked hard, got in

ROBINSON: the labor movement, and the Urban League asked me to be on their board. I accepted membership on the National Board of the Urban League, and I went to the meeting--one meeting--and I told them what they had done to me as a black child finishing high school. That I saw all these other children getting jobs, and they told me my mother had to be on relief. By that time, you know, I'm learning how to talk, and I thanked them for this great honor, but I wanted them to give it to someone else, and I left. Great deal of satisfaction, right? If I was older, I would have done it differently, but I got a great deal of satisfaction out of that. But I waited years; I waited years, and I accepted it, right? And I told them, and I did not care too much, I only hoped that one person would know what it meant to be a person--what they did to me. Uh, hum. But, see you come away, you're bloody but unbowed. You can imagine what they then were going to do to me. Right? You can imagine what they have in the back of the mind. But I didn't care; I had my day. Suppose someone came to me for advice on what to do? I wouldn't tell them, I'd say.... I may tell them what I did, and I'd also point out another thing, an alternative. To stay there and fight or get people to join you, to see if you could change it--it may not happen in your lifetime. But there were people who did that. And maybe they're due more credit for having stayed. I don't see too many of the changes, but, you know. My way was not that way.

INTERVIEWER: Well, probably it takes both approaches.

ROBINSON: Oh, I have a feeling it takes revolution and evolution to gain progress, and you have to decide which one you're with. But, that was the Urban League, that was something.

INTERVIEWER: What were some of the subjects that you liked? What did you envision yourself doing when you were a little girl?

ROBINSON: Oh, I probably was going to teach. But, my mother was hell bent against teaching in the South. Because she knew the South, and she knew the restrictions, and she knew all of that. But, she never talked about them. I think they thought that if they built all of this up, that maybe you wouldn't have a nice childhood. That would be one group of thinking. I don't think this thinking changed, either, until many years later, you see. But, she was against teaching. She felt that you come up and you do something else. But, I did want to go to the University of Pennsylvania. That was the one school.

INTERVIEWER: How come?

ROBINSON: Because I'd lived in Philadelphia, and I'd heard about it. That was the school I could think of, and I wanted to do that. It would have been all right with her. But at that time, money was very short. And then, my father was dead, and that was that. So, I ended up thinking that maybe law would be what I wanted to do.

INTERVIEWER: So, when you started in the labor movement, you had this in your mind? That you were going to do it sometime?

ROBINSON: Sometime. I was going to try to get that law degree. The thing that really made me get it was that I always felt that in negotiations--contract negotiations--that lawyers were deliberately trying to make it hard for workers to understand what they were doing and saying. I felt that legal language was one thing, but that workers could understand what it was all about, if they were told. And I went to law school because I was determined to put those contracts into words that workers could understand. And that's what really got me teed off. I used to get angry with them. Because I knew you could say it so that they could understand it. I knew it could be written so that they could understand. And that's what got me started in law. And then I got Blackstone in law school, and Blackstone I used in labor education. I did a course--and I was trying to find that course--I did a course at Sarah Lawrence [College] once, and I used Blackstone all through it. It was really something, the beginnings of society and things of that sort. I looked for it the other day, because I should have sent those papers to the school, but I didn't; I haven't sent them.

INTERVIEWER: Is this a book that anyone can read?

ROBINSON: Yes, anyone can read. It's legal, but it's really great. It was great for me. I had wonderful teachers of Blackstone--he's dead now--and I used it in labor education. You see, I felt that everything I was doing outside, I should be able to use it, pull it back and be able to bring it back to the labor movement. It kept me going. I was excited about all of this. So that I felt with law, and then when Jan was born, I was ill for two years, so that I couldn't take the Bar. I couldn't walk, had a bad burn--didn't sue either--but I was ill for two good years. Then, I lost interest. I didn't read a book. I don't think I opened a book for three years after I finished law school. I was just that ill--tired. I was tired. Now that you mention it, and others have told

ROBINSON: me--I was just tired. And so that was the situation there. But, I have used it in so many ways. I have used it in government. I have used it all over, because I had used it in interpretation to other people, so that they would be able to understand what it's all about--the legal field. That's that. I felt it would be a service to everyone. I use it here, you see. It's a good training ground anyway.

INTERVIEWER: So, during those two years, you said that you got involved in political campaigning and such. What did you do?

ROBINSON: Jan was about two. I was rolling the carriage around, and let's say, and Dr. Taylor then, Gardner Taylor, was new to the city and they asked him to do something politically, and he said that I would represent him. And so, I started going to meetings for him. And then we started [political] registration, and I had some leaflets from the trade union movement--I always kept them--and I found that there was a group of men meeting every Sunday morning for breakfast--and that there were forty-two of them, and they'd meet Sunday morning, and they'd stay and talk and discuss. And they weren't doing anything. So, I found the leader, Judge Page, and I asked if I could come to that meeting on Sunday morning. So, they'd say, "No, Dollie, now, you don't want to come. We can't have you coming to a meeting of all men." And I said, "Oh, let me come on Sunday morning."

INTERVIEWER: Was it just an informal group?

ROBINSON: An informal group. And then finally I went to the meeting and I told them that I was a firm believer that if I had six sons, I could rule the world. And here there was forty-two men, and all we needed to rule this area of Brooklyn we live in was to organize and we could do it. And I'd be glad to do the leg work for them, because I wasn't up to par, wasn't working, and I had to take my child around, if they would allow me to. And that's all I asked.

They met and they did all that talking and everything and the next Sunday, they asked me to come back, and they started talking about organization, and we formed the Pioneer Civic Association with forty-two men and one woman. And when it came time for election, the established Democratic Club in the area had to negoatiate with us. If the leader wanted to be re-elected, he would have to take someone from our organization to run with him. They, they were running leaders and co-leaders.

ROBINSON: So, in that next election, Pioneer [Civic Association] put me up as co-leader, and we supported him as the leader. And we won that election. And then that's when Harriman appointed me Secretary of the New York State Department of Labor under Lubin--Isidore Lubin was the Commissioner of Labor at that time. This time I'm fighting, we're fighting for more. And we're fighting this little leader who wanted us to disband after we joined him. Then, what else happened? I became Equal Opportunity Officer in New York State.

INTERVIEWER: What did you do as Secretary of Labor?

ROBINSON: The union label was the main thing, and hearings on minimum wage laws and things of that sort. Now, I think it's more ceremonial than anything else. But, the definite duties were that we were in charge of the union label; we were in charge of the [minimum wage] hearings. I would hear hearings at one stage, I guess that was the appeal stage. I was in charge of migrant camps, the upgrading of migrant camps. It was interesting. That was the time I went to a migrant camp and was hired as a worker so that I could get facts. And I stayed my good three days in the camp, and it was really very interesting, very interesting. But, we were able to get firsthand information, with my little Minox camera, and everything. But, we did a nice job. Three days in one camp, three in another; all over, spent about twenty-eight days working as a migrant.

INTERVIEWER: Did it result in any changes?

ROBINSON: Always, you get a little bit of change with everything. The prices for food changed. The living conditions, toilet conditions. Each year they would whack away at one thing and get improvement. And then, there came a minimum wage law, and that's what they were working toward. Migrant camps are bad now, but they were even worse. So, gradually there has been improvement, quite a bit.

INTERVIEWER: How long did you have that job?

ROBINSON: Oh, about two years. Then, what did I do? Oh, Bunnie, Bernice Fisher, was working for Jerry Wurf at AFSCME [American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees] organizing hospitals. She could organize the hospital, but she couldn't call a strike. Her whole makeup wouldn't allow her to call a strike because of the harm to patients. So, Jerry was going to fire her

ROBINSON: if she didn't call the strike, and I know Bunnie needed the job, and I wasn't working. So, I went over to Jerry and said, "I'll call the strike." He said, "I'm not going to pay you." And I said, "I didn't ask to be paid. Bunnie is to be paid. I'll call the strike." I worked on the strike, we fought the strike through, and then he called me in and offered me a job. And then I worked there until I went to Washington when [John] Kennedy called.

I was organizing the hospital unit of AFSCME in the New York area. I organized the psychiatric social workers and the medical social workers in the city. The first medical and psychiatric and social workers I organized. It was 5420 or fight. That was what we wanted for them in that day. So that was the feather in my crown for AFSME.

INTERVIEWER: What did 5420 mean?

ROBINSON: You remember it was "54-40 or fight." What was that--the Monroe Doctrine or some Louisiana something? Anyway, ours was $5,420 or fight, and I had them sleeping at City Hall, and we got the contract for them. I was very pleased with that. And then I was organizing hospitals, I was assigned to hospitals in [AFSCME] District Council 37, and I was at Queens General Hospital one day, and I called the office, and they said to me, "You're to call Congressman Powell in Washington." I went into the director's office and called. When I got Adam [Powell], he said, "Dollie." I said, "Yes." He said, "I've just left the White House and the President tells me to tell you to come on down." And that's when I went to Washington as Assistant to the Director of the Women's Bureau and that was Esther Peterson. We had worked together at the Amalgamated. So, that was that one.

INTERVIEWER: How long did you do that?

ROBINSON: I stayed there from '63 to '65, and then went on to Africa for the Trade Fair.

INTERVIEWER: How did that come about?

ROBINSON: The Trade Fair?* Well, we were chosen. Willard Wirtz, I'd been working with Arthur Goldberg** and Esther [Peterson], and Willard Wirtz was the U.S. Secretary [of Labor]. They'd been having trade fairs in Africa,

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* East African Trade Fair, sponsored by U.S. Department of Commerce.

** U.S. Secretary of Labor, appointed by President Kennedy.

ROBINSON: and they chose two labor people to go--Murray Gross from the ILG, and I went as labor representative. And we were in Kenya, East Africa. We did East Africa and then we did West Africa. Kenya, Tanzania--we were in Uganda, Ethiopia, and then we went up to Khartoum and came down to Nigeria. Murray left me in Nigeria. From Nigeria I went to Ghana, and then to Liberia, back to Nigeria and home. Those months were interesting months.

INTERVIEWER: You had never been to Africa?

ROBINSON: That was my first trip. The first trip was a great trip. Then, they gave us related travel in Europe, too. We visited the labor attaché offices all over, and that was a very good trip.

INTERVIEWER: And what was the purpose of it?

ROBINSON: One, the Trade Fair was for American products, you see, and they were exhibiting....

INTERVIEWER: Looking for African markets?

ROBINSON: Looking for African markets. I had a very interesting thing. When we left, they had a Polaroid camera, and they'd shipped film. Let's see, Murray Gross, Art Chapin and the fellows, no one wanted to take this camera on their shoulders. So, I took the camera on my shoulders. And, when I got into Africa at the Trade Fair, I had the camera and I was taking it, so I took pictures. We were to take pictures at the Trade Fair and give them to the people. And this was the greatest thing you have ever seen. It was a real breakthrough, you see. So then when they say that whenever you saw a crowd, you'd know I was in the middle of it--when they saw this, that I was meeting so many people, it was really wonderful. And then, I guess we used much film, a great deal. It was really great. The youngsters would come up, and they were such wonderful children. They would come up and say, "Madame, would you please take my picture. I have never seen myself." They were little con artists, you know. But, it was great. And then we were in Kenya at a time when there was this friction with the Asians, you know. Little African boys would push little Asian boys out of the way, saying, "Don't take his picture." Then I said, "Oh, now listen, I'm not taking yours again." Then the next time he'd come up, "He is my friend, take my picture with him. Take our picture." Then, he'd

ROBINSON: want the picture. Then I'd say, "No, you have one. Give it to him." "Oh, Madame, I need another one." It was funny. But, the Trade Fair was interesting.

INTERVIEWER: Were there any unions starting in Africa?

ROBINSON: Oh, strong ones. They were the greatest in the world. The people serving us in the hotels--in the daytime--these people who were so meek and humble. At night, when they'd scratch on your door to come to a meeting, they were the leaders. And, if you want to see anything thrilling, you must go to an evening meeting where there are lights on a hill, and you're talking to masses of people. It's just tremendous. It's tremendous to see a union meeting there. Sure, the unions were strong. Many, most of the [government] leaders were from the trade unions. It's an exciting place, because that little person waiting on you, at night is leading a double life. Leading, leading, leading. Strong leaders, too. Uh, hum. The greatest leader of Africa was here, Nyrere, Julius Nyrere. Really great.

INTERVIEWER: Which country?

ROBINSON: Tanzania. Great. Really great!

INTERVIEWER: It's interesting what's going on in Africa. Everything is changing and moving.

ROBINSON: It's moving, isn't it? It's fast moving. And you really don't know. You really don't know. I hope things work out so that the people get a good shake and there's some democracy and it's not under the control of just a few people. Yes. It's hard to tell. Africa is funny. It's hard to tell what's going to develop there. It may not be democracy as we know it, but it probably will be a little different from what people here expect.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think there's any hope for a large African state, or do you think that people prefer to have things broken up into smaller countries?

ROBINSON: I really don't know. There may be. I don't know. I do know--I'm sure that Julius is well-respected. I think Julius is the greatest. He was here when my daughter was six or seven. She was at Brooklyn Friends [School]. Each year, for her birthday, I had a party at Jones Beach. We would take a bus, and each parent would have to accompany their child. Julius was here for two of those. When

ROBINSON: he became Prime Minister, first, of Tanzania. Oh, those parents brought all of the pictures that they had taken of him on the bus outing. And they were happy when he became President. Oh, happy. They knew a president of an African country. He has always been quiet, and my friend tells me, Ethel Payne, who went with Kissinger on this last trip to Africa, that Kissinger really has the greatest respect for him. He's really great. He's great. I'm hoping, well he is doing great things. I guess Masaye is getting older, there's Jomo Kenyatta, he's getting old. And I guess the English and everyone will do everything to keep him alive, because they never know what's going to happen with his passing.

INTERVIEWER: In law school, were you one of few women?

ROBINSON: Yes, yes, you know that. I guess we were four or five.

INTERVIEWER: In a class of how many?

ROBINSON: Probably forty.

INTERVIEWER: Was it hard to get into law school as a woman?

ROBINSON: I took the placement thing, and we were accepted. I didn't have any hassle about that, no. They gave us some tests to see whether or not we were suited for law. And we took that. I remember one chap took that, and his came out to show that he would be an excellent artist. But, we were in, we got in, and that was no hassle.

INTERVIEWER: Oh, here's an interesting question. What kinds of arguments were there in your family? Was your family in any way different from the others in your neighborhood?

ROBINSON: Yep. My family was different because my father was away in the Navy, and he came home at various intervals, you know, on furlough. So that, it was a different family. I mean, absolutely. We probably had no arguments because he was in and out. My mother was in control of that household. And, when he came in, he was the head of that household, and we had fun, did a lot of things with him. He was a very outgoing person, very tall. I think that's why I wear capes today. I've worn capes for many years because I always remember my father with a cape on, and black shoes that were made for him. I was always attracted by that. So, when I started having my clothes made, the first thing I had made was a cape. My mother was there, alone; the two of us were alone most of the time. And

ROBINSON: he was home on furloughs at various intervals. Before I was born, she would live in Brooklyn; near the Brooklyn Navy Yard or in Philadelphia to be near the Navy. But then we had the house in the South. No quarrels, fussing. Even so, if they had them, they wouldn't let me hear them. I mean, a child was shielded from that.

INTERVIEWER: Where did he travel in the Navy?

ROBINSON: Oh, all over the world. All over the world. But he was in the Navy from the time he was seventeen, for thirty years. And that's the only life he knew. He was recruited from a little town, Edington, North Carolina.

INTERVIEWER: Did he bring things back?

ROBINSON: Yes, I still have them. I still have them. Swords, a violin from Germany, china, dresses, lace things that were brought. Two lace skirts that my mother used, I used, and now they're packed in a trunk. But, a lot of things from all over the world. We had those, and I have many of them now. We take them out and use them. The swords I have out now. Little sets, tea sets, cocoa sets and things like that. Silverware, brass. He did send quite a few things. Although I realized now, after awhile, it was a natural situation for him to be away and come home on furlough, he was really out of the home a lot. I mean, you know, because if he was in Europe or anyplace else, it was months before he got home.

INTERVIEWER: Were you away from home a lot when your daughter was growing up?

ROBINSON: No, only the time in Washington. No, I was home.

INTERVIEWER: Did you feel that it was necessary for you to be there?

ROBINSON: Yes, I felt very keenly about those first years of a child. And I think you should stay home with them. If you can stay seven, it's good, but four or five until they're.... they feel pretty secure after that. And then I was lucky with my mother in the home. Baby sitters weren't coming and going, and you know that she had the constant love, and it wasn't an upheaval at any time.

INTERVIEWER: Was religion important in your family?

ROBINSON: Well, we went to church. She [my daughter] was in church. We felt it was necessary to give her a little background in it, but we were not the religious churchgoers. She went to Friends Weekly Meetings and as she got older, she wanted to go. We went to a little Baptist Church around the corner that had a choir that she could sing in and clap her hands, and enjoy that. So, she had that.

INTERVIEWER: How about when you were living in the South?

ROBINSON: Church every Sunday. Didn't miss a one. My mother and I had an agreement. There were two things I could do when I was eighteen years of age. One, cut my hair, and two, not go to church. "You'll go to church until you're eighteen. When you're eighteen you can do whatever you want to." On that day, I went out and cut my hair. I used to play for the church, piano. Most of us in the South had to take it, the piano. I even played for a small church when I came up here.

INTERVIEWER: Did you learn how to play when you were a child?

ROBINSON: Yes, I took music at an early age. My mother had a feeling that once you start to learn to read and write, you take music. Never learned to play the violin, but I play the piano. It's good for you. It's an outlet, too. It's good. I never could play without music. I always wanted to play by ear, but my mother would always catch me when I was trying to play jazz or something, and keep me to the music. She would listen and keep me to the music. You must play that.

INTERVIEWER: Do you have any friends now that you had from the time you were in high school?

ROBINSON: Yes. I have friends from the South. One especially, who calls me each year and tells me that my property needs grass cutting. And she takes care of that. I send money for that. I have about six of those people. Here, I have still friends. Yeah, I hold on to a few.

INTERVIEWER: Have any of them gone in the same direction you have, or other ways?

ROBINSON: Other ways. I was the one in the labor movement. Others chose other fields. Some of them holding elective office, lawyers, doctors, various fields.

INTERVIEWER: You're still active in political things?

ROBINSON: Yes. Yes. Yes.

INTERVIEWER: What do you do?

ROBINSON: Oh, I sort of train my students now. I have a political science seminar.

In the Kennedy Administration, I was very attached to this young woman from Texas. I worked in the U.S. Labor Department with her. She was fond of Jan. When they were getting ready to do the [Democratic] Convention [Summer 1976], she called and said, "Could Jan work with me, I'm coming up to do the Convention." Jan was working with the Girl Scouts and she wanted to get one year in so that she could say that they didn't fire her. So, she didn't want to go. Plus the fact that Jan's nails are that long, and she didn't want to type, either. So, I told her that Jan, I was sure, would not be the one she needed, but that I would have someone. Because you need someone you can really trust; that is devoted to you and will do your work. And that young woman came up and put that convention together. I took a young woman from the campus who was good and had good secretarial skills and was working on campus, and was also a student here getting her degree. And she put that convention together, the one that came from Texas, and it was beautifully done. That was Daisy Morton. So, I was at the Convention, and I was so proud. Plus the fact that I chose Carter long before anyone else did. And that was another plus. So, I keep my hand in politics.

INTERVIEWER: You were a delegate to the convention?

ROBINSON: No, I didn't run for delegate.

INTERVIEWER: How come?

ROBINSON: Well, really at the time I didn't think of it. When Bill Vandenheuvel* and I thought of it, it was too late to get the petitions going. Really, I probably should have, but I hadn't run for office since I won the constitutional convention. You know, the New York State Constitutional Convention. And they're going to have another one, constitutional convention. So, I haven't been running, but I've been active.

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* Delegate to the New York State Constitutional Convention.

INTERVIEWER: How long have you been at the school? [Brooklyn College]

ROBINSON: Seven years.

INTERVIEWER: And before that?

ROBINSON: Before that, I came back from Washington. I organized nursing homes. I came back from Africa and Peter Ottley* asked me to come in and do some voluntary hospital organizing [for SEIU Local 144]. That's an interesting set-up. So, I worked there for Peter. I came here from A. Philip Randolph Institute. The former Dean here, who wrote the proposal for Small College, asked me to come and I told her that education wasn't the thing. And she told me about the proposal and they ran into difficulty--money. And they needed the vote of the City Council. So, I organized that and got the hearings before the City Council. And from those hearings, the students were so great in telling what it meant; the Chancellor put them in his budget for $180,000, and then we were safe. Next year it was back in the college budget. So after that, she asked if I would come on board here. I came on board not knowing that she was sick unto death. When I got here, I saw that she was very ill. We did a conference, the Democratic Women's Conference, and I got them to put her on the panel, on my panel. And she was asleep that night, and she groaned and moaned and cried, all in her sleep, and I realized that she was sick. So I came on and I helped her. And I became, really, her right hand, doing whatever she had, because she had cancer. And she went to the hospital, and everybody here thought that was it. And I just breathed life into her, and I told her, "You can do it, you can come back." She came back and stayed to live two years. It was really a remarkable thing. When she passed, I stayed on and I've been here ever since. Then, the president put out a search committee for someone to fill her place. I was on that. Then, this young woman, you haven't met her, Leslie Jacobson, the same name as Myrtle Jacobson, was the one who did the proposal for Small College. And Leslie Jacobson was chosen to continue as head of the School of General Studies and the special program. This is her second year.

INTERVIEWER: As a matter of fact, I read a report of the study that was done on--it was called Project Second Start. Oh, that's by Jolly.**

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* President, Local 144, Service Employees International Union [SEIU].

** Jolly Robinson, co-author of Project Second Start, a report on the needs of mature persons entering college and how they were being met by Small College at Brooklyn College.

INTERVIEWER: Yes, Jolly Robinson and Suzanne Paul. I thought it was very inspiring, actually.

ROBINSON: I got Myrtle to let them do it. It was unusual for us to let anyone to come in.

INTERVIEWER: Has money gotten really tight? Have the cutbacks hurt the programs?

ROBINSON: The cutbacks will hurt us all. It is hurting us in class size. Our program is more dependent upon small class size than anything else. And if we have to have thirty people in a class, we lose something. It's cut us back as far as peer tutors go. We are very successful with tutors if they are from the class because they know the work that has been given. They can help bring the student up. That has hurt us there. But, they're using CETA people for tutoring and it's becoming like classwork again. So, we're hurting. Not in the way others are. We had cutback in staff adjuncts, but we can manage that.

INTERVIEWER: Reading in that report what women students were saying about what the program had meant to them was really marvelous.

ROBINSON: It's a good program. What you have to do, you have to have a continual evaluation. It must have a built-in evaluation of the program, so that you can improve it as you go along. If you leave it, you lose a great deal. We've been without a director for some time, and we're hoping to get one in September. Some feel that we need an administrator, and I don't feel that we need an administrator. We need someone who is really interested in students and their motivation. I think administration you can get done by any clerical group. And you need a person of strength at the top so that the students feel good.

INTERVIEWER: When you were talking about going to evening high school and being involved with the Laundry Workers Union, you said that the Women's Trade Union League helped organize. Were you involved with the Women's Trade Union League?

ROBINSON: Oh, yes. The Women's Trade Union League assigned an organizer to Laundry, and that organizer was Helen Blanchard. I don't know if you've heard the name or not, but Helen Blanchard* was from Restaurant and did a great deal for Laundry. I mean she was very, very

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* Formerly a restaurant worker, who became a staff member of the Women's Trade Union League, assigned to organization.

ROBINSON: helpful. So when we became organized, we then--all of us--became members of the Women's Trade Union League because then the only way we could learn about unions, because we knew nothing about unions, we knew that we were oppressed and wanted to do something about it, was through the Women's Trade Union League. We could not actually take minutes, you know, or know how to conduct meetings. We knew nothing about parliamentary procedure, unless we'd had it in some of our local organizations. But through the League, we had all of these things. They ran classes for workers: parliamentary procedure, duties of the secretary, duties of the president, all of these things. And the leadership there was really a dedicated leadership.

Let's see, who did they have? Rose Schneiderman, Pauline Newman*--those were the ones who were really the active ones who helped us. Freida Miller** and Mrs. Roosevelt were very close to the group, and this is how we got to know her [Mrs. Roosevelt], and she became interested in us and things of that sort. So that was the Women's Trade Union League. They performed a very real function for young trade unionist women who were active but needed to know how to be active and what to do. So we learned a great deal through that organization.

INTERVIEWER: Did you stay active with them?

ROBINSON: For many years, for many years. Yes, because it was through the League that I....right, through the League I guess, I got the scholarship to the Hudson Shore Labor School. So I went to the Hudson Shore Labor School and there Mabel Leslie*** was the director at the time. Esther [Peterson] was a teacher there and there we met League people. They

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* Rose Schneiderman, President of the Women's Trade Union League [WTUL]. Pauline Newman, education officer of the ILGWU Health Center and former leader of WTUL.

** Industrial Commissioner of New York State and Director of Women's Bureau of the U.S. Department of Labor in the 1940's.

*** Arbitrator, New York State Arbitration Board and Director of Hudson Shore Labor School.

ROBINSON: came on campus. They taught. They were very, very active. Mabel was the director and she was very, very active with the League. So that they played a very real part in the lives of workers. So we did stay active with them, um-hum.

INTERVIEWER: It was at the Hudson Shore Labor School that this play was done that I was talking with Esther about. You might have seen it there. It was done by the students. You might have been in it.

ROBINSON: I probably was in it.

INTERVIEWER: Had music, all different kinds of workers in it.

ROBINSON: Yeah, we were probably all in it. Who remembered it?

INTERVIEWER: There's a group in Minneapolis that's trying to find a copy of it because they want to do it.

ROBINSON: Oh, really, wonderful, wonderful. Hilda Smith was the owner of the Hudson Shore Labor School. She was the former dean of Bryn Mawr. So when the Bryn Mawr School for Workers closed down, they opened Hudson Shore and we went there, and Hilda was the owner and very real people. She's alive still. She's still alive in Washington, um-hum, very good. I don't know, I haven't received a poem this year. She usually sends a poem each year. But she's a doll. I'd like to see that thing, I guess we were all in it.

INTERVIEWER: Did they do a lot of things like that? Skits?

ROBINSON: Oh, sure. Skits, plays, yeah. That was where, Hudson Shore was where, really, I learned about workers' education. Because they took the experiences of the workers and taught them. They could teach economics; they could teach science; they could teach things through the experience of these workers. And it was just unbelievable how much workers could learn from the people who were there. That was another place, Amy Hughes,* Madeline Grant.** Oh, what is Miss Brown's first name, she's blind and taught science. Terrific person, I've forgotten her name, her last name was Brown, Amy? No, not Amy. But she was another, a tremendous person. She taught us science, the planets and all that. You had to go to the Planetarium up in her place, it was really great. Yeah.

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* Professor at Mt. Holyoke College and teacher at Hudson Shore Labor School.

** Professor at Sarah Lawrence College and teacher at Hudson Shore Labor School.

INTERVIEWER: Did they have classes after work, or were they week-long sessions, or....?

ROBINSON: Hudson Shore? Summer. If you were lucky and you got time off from work to go. I'm not sure how that was arranged. Whether the League gave you, I know we paid nothing to go, because we were on scholarship, so that we were there as workers free. I guess if we got off from work, they took care of the expenses that way. So that was the way that was done. Workers came on scholarship from all over the country.

INTERVIEWER: Did the unions pay for part of it?

ROBINSON: Probably. I really can't remember who did. I know the scholarship was given you, and the union probably did something for workers. Maybe not, too, because the unions were not too interested in workers becoming educated at that point. And they did not quite know what these people were educating. Now, the League did have the confidence of unions, but you were never sure what the leadership of trade unions, because the leadership, or workers from the plants too, they weren't sure whether they were teaching you how to take over from them or what. And they weren't sure that if you learned a little and came back that you wouldn't think that you were better than the workers there, you see, so there was that apprehension. So, I don't know what the real contribution of unions....I guess ours did, the Amalgamated probably gave us some and made a contribution, because they were a little further advanced than some of the others, and I guess the ILG may have, because they were more advanced. And they sort of had education going, the two groups. But in some of the other unions, I imagine, some of the girls had quite a hard time.

INTERVIEWER: Did you go to any other school, in between all of these schools you went to in connection with the union?

ROBINSON: Wellesley Institute for Social Planning,* that was one, that was another scholarship from the trade union movement. That was the one that Eleanor Colt** was quite active with. The other, Hudson Shore Labor School, and that was it.

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* A summer institute at Wellesley that included workers and university students.

** Director, American Labor Education Service.

INTERVIEWER: And from there you went to law school?

ROBINSON: From there I came to Brooklyn College in the evenings. You see, that was many years before I went to law school. First, I became very active in the union, but I came out here [Brooklyn College] to evening school. And then, after some years, I decided I was going to law school and that followed after, oh, I guess I was negotiating contracts for the union by that time and I decided I need the law, other reasons.

INTERVIEWER: So, you'd been going to school for a long, long time?

ROBINSON: Oh, yeah. There was nothing else to do. Went to work, go to school, work, learn a little bit more, and hope that you really could be of service to the people you were trying to service.

INTERVIEWER: How did your mother feel about your becoming involved in....

ROBINSON: Trade unions? Well, I'm sure that sometimes she felt that it was a pretty hectic thing, but she was not against it. I mean, she was not against the work. She was against the hours, because she thought they were awfully long hours, which they were. And she probably, health-wise and things of that sort, but as far as fighting for gains, she enjoyed that part of it herself, because she was kept abreast of it, and the house was teeming with people all the time. Because people were going and coming; workers were planning and working toward goals. And she liked the little victories that we had now and then. So, she was not against it at all. And I guess she considered that if you were working for better wages and better conditions, she liked that very much.

INTERVIEWER: Were you still in the Women's Trade Union League when it disbanded?

ROBINSON: No, not as active. Because after Rose Schneiderman and Pauline Newman and the group gave it over, I mean, younger people were supposed to come in. I mean they were sort of getting away from it. Gerel Rubien* then became president of it. She was from the ILG, and all of that. Then, my interests were a little different. Because what you try to do is to keep young trade

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* Education director of Local 66, ILGWU; last president of WTUL.

ROBINSON: unionists going into organizations like that so that they could learn and get the know how. Some of the training was being done by unions now. A great deal of it. There were classes. They were doing much more. The League was sort of losing its real worth. I mean, it could have been helpful, but trade unions would not support it as much as they had. Because if they were building their own educational programs, doing that, then they felt those funds should go for that. So, it was token support of the Women's Trade Union League after that, and then it dwindled to no support. And the younger people who had not had to go through the great struggle to build the union did not see the need for the League as much as those of us who had struggled and who could not get the training unless it was from some outside organization. So that, we were not as close; we remained close to the older leadership, like Rose and Pauline, because they continued active in other areas, especially Pauline Newman, she kept going. She and Mrs. Hillman were really the most active ones for a long time in New York City. So, when the League closed its doors, we were not as active as we should have been.

INTERVIEWER: Was the League specially involved with things for women, in terms of the special needs of women workers that maybe the unions were not?

ROBINSON: Yes, they had a broader base, and that was one of things that could have kept them open much longer. You see, they were, I guess, the first women's righters, or something of the sort. However, I guess the League probably would have lost its force, its power, because they had fought for so many laws, and they were in the forefront for fighting for these laws for workers, you know, especially for women. For instance, the weight lifting laws, the fifteen-pound weight, the sitting, the stools, you know, stools, especially in elevators, or laws that affected women. I guess there are probably many on the books that you could trace back to the Women's Trade Union League. I'm sure there were many because Frieda Miller, who became the Commissioner of Labor, her background was the Women's Trade Union League. These were the women who supported her. And these were the knowledgable women because they were in contact with her. I think these women had more knowledge of legislation than any other group of women, so that they were in the forefront. They were the people who would really do it. They were the people who were really doing things. What would they have done now with women's rights? Huh?

INTERVIEWER: Well, I know that some of them, that Pauline Newman and Rose Schneiderman were opposed to the Equal Rights Amendment because they felt it would do away with some of the things that they had won for women.

ROBINSON: Oh, yeah. They were opposed to Equal Rights because, ah, who was the women in Pennsylvania who was for it? Guffey Miller.* Emma Guffey Miller was for the Equal Rights Amendment. The Women's Trade Union League was opposed to the Equal Rights Amendment because they felt that they had fought for the protective legislation and an Equal Rights Amendment would wipe it all off the books. That if they wanted something to include all people, that they should extend the laws they had, the laws on the books for the protection of women, extend those laws to men. This was the road, this was the position taken at that time. This was the position that we had been brought up on, it was very hard for people who had been brought up with that and really could see that in New York State, you had maybe 162 or 192 laws on the book protecting women, that you were going to put an equal rights amendment in that would say that everybody was equal, what would you do about these situations. We used to have a famous saying that, "Well, sure, we don't want women to lift fifty pounds. But there are some men who can't lift fifty pounds, too. We don't want them excluded. We want the law extended to them." Well, that was very hard. And I think a lot of people would like not to be around when you can say, "Well, I remember when you were against the Equal Rights Amendment!" Because it's very difficult for them to say, they were so adamant about it. Esther was one of them, you know, Esther Peterson. Esther switched, she became a great Equal Rights Amendment person.

INTERVIEWER: Just about everybody who was around at that time felt that way.

ROBINSON: That's right. And they changed their mind. People should change their mind. But you must have a very good reason and be able to explain it. And the Amendment is going to have difficulty in passing in New York for that very same reason. It really will have difficulty.

INTERVIEWER: How do you feel about it?

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* Pennsylvania leader in the fight for the Equal Rights Amendment.

ROBINSON: Passing? Equal Rights Amendment? I want you to have equal rights, equality. I want you to have equality. I want you to be equal to anything else and everybody else, right? Who knows. But the Amendment will have difficulty passing here. They never believed me on campus when I told them it wouldn't pass. I had strange bedfellows (laughs), but I knew it wouldn't pass. It couldn't; it had been too ingrained in New York State, and the people were still alive.

INTERVIEWER: And so you think a lot of work would need to be done?

ROBINSON: Have to. First of all, you'd have to take care of every one of those laws on the books. Every one of those laws. And if you want it to pass, I would think the Equal Righters would be working on those bills, those laws.

INTERVIEWER: Saying, "Extend this to men"?

ROBINSON: Be sure that those laws are not lost to the female? Right? And then who could complain then? Who could complain if the protective legislation is protected? No one would care about the Amendment. But until you do that, you can't expect people to say, "Well, we're going to wipe off this, or do this," without explaining to them what's going to happen in situations. And they underestimated the electorate at this time. That's the only thing; they underestimated it. It can be done, but it's hard work. And they were talkers and not doers, and that's what happened to that.

INTERVIEWER: And all those people who put in a lot of years fighting for something, that took a long time, that was a lot of work.

ROBINSON: Oh, that was a lot of work. We had some of the best protective legislation in the whole country.

INTERVIEWER: How did you find it dealing with unions in this matter? I found myself working at the Amalgamated. The Amalgamated has a very, well, they don't go around giving you raises easily, shall we say?

ROBINSON: Really? They didn't? Oh, shame on them! [laughs] You mean, they didn't? Strong union, I bet. Strong company union.

INTERVIEWER: Was the union there, when you were working there, for the employees?

ROBINSON: I think they organized afterward. Yeah, they organized after. Did they join the union from Louis Hollander's local, the New York Joint Board? What union did you belong to?

INTERVIEWER: Well, the General Office [ACWA National Headquarters] has two: OPEIU [Office and Professional Employees International Union] and the Newspaper Guild.*

ROBINSON: Oh, I see. Um-hm. I guess some belonged to the Newspaper Guild when I was there, but they didn't have the OPEIU. That was new. No, we were our only union. No money. So, you joined the union.

INTERVIEWER: No, they wouldn't let me join the union.

ROBINSON: They wouldn't let you?

INTERVIEWER: Because I was part-time, temporary. You see, originally, I started to work on the Farah campaign. You know, that was going to be over, right? So, I was hired on a temporary basis, but then I continued working for a year and-a-half.

ROBINSON: But, you know what, I think I was young at the time, so I just felt that age sixty-five or retirement would never arrive, you see. And I think those things were being handed out and people were being put on. In Laundry, it was such a favor they were doing them, and that type of thing. So, never one to bow to that type of thing, they could have it! But, I imagine I had a better berth than a lot of people had there, in terms of being able to say what I felt like saying. There were times when I was in deep trouble. There were times when I had to have good friends. Blumberg--Hyman Blumberg was Executive Vice-President under Potofsky and Rosenblum--was a good friend of mine and Mrs. Hillman, always. Mrs. Hillman, always. She would try her best, but she never, never tried to break my spirit, or say to you this or that. She was a great person, I really loved her, I really did. I know it must have been hard on her at times to really champion me. But, she helped me survive.

INTERVIEWER: You just said something that I have often felt too, that there is something of a conflict in asking for more money and things for yourself, and having the independence to do what you want to do in the job. You always have to balance those things off a little bit.

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* In the ACWA, union staff clerical workers belong to OPEIU and staff professional workers belong to the Newspaper Guild.

ROBINSON: That's right. And I'll tell you what. If you have a truly independent spirit, you can't do it. You really can't do it. Or, maybe you can do it, but you've got to have more insight and more knowledge and know more really what you want to do. And you've got to be a little devious. And that, you know, I think that was what hurt me more about the people that I'd respected, and been brought up to respect in the labor movement, than anything else. When I saw that they used devious means and methods of survival. At my age now, "36," I can forgive them, because they were thinking in terms of survival, right? I can forgive them now and I can understand them. But at that time, I couldn't. I could not. Therefore, I lost respect for a lot of people. Now, I can understand what they were doing. I would not do it yet. I know I wouldn't. I know I wouldn't. But I understand what they were doing. And if I see a young trade unionist, I will point up everything to them and show them all of the things they're doing, so they may not make the mistake of withdrawing. Because, you see, you work in a trade union and there comes a point, like in sociology they tell you that you go to this point and then they need a different type of leadership, so then there is a tendency to discard you. Because the real person who organized may never be the person that can conform to the crushing of the top leadership. That's the thing that I try to tell people. If you cannot change at the point that these people want you to change; if your leadership is very, very limited, the change is too very great. Then, if you cannot do that, then you're going to be a very, very miserable person and you have to get out.

Look, I don't know whether you know it, have you noticed in District 65? Now, District 65 was supposed to be one of the most progressive, left-wing unions, right? Now, there's a woman that's been there for twenty-seven, maybe twenty-eight and-a-half years, needs one more year for a thirty-year retirement. They move her out. Thelma Daly. That's right. Moving her out. The worst thing you've ever seen. The worst thing you've ever seen. What can I tell Thelma? Use every method within to fight it, and then see what can be done. This is a young woman, young woman? This is a person that I have--she used me as a sounding when things were really rough. Talk, talk, talk, talk, to keep her there. Because they would give her an assignment. When she started getting cards and organizing, they'd take her off because they didn't want her to do it. It hurts you; it crushes your heart. Find some outside activity. Get some women, organize them. Do something, you see, to keep yourself from being crushed inside. We've done that for years with

ROBINSON: her. She's been active outside. She's done everything outside. But this year, last week, August 1st they gave her [notice] to get out. Now, if you press them, they say incompetence. It doesn't take twenty-nine years to find out that the person is incompetent. You see? This is the thing, this is the thing. Doesn't that eat you up? Now, this is trade unionism. District 65! And they were built on the basis of Russia, the great progressives, and this is what they do. And what do they do, who will they put in her place? They'll take an incompetent black man and put him there. Can you get people to rally on equal rights? No, they won't rally. Who can you get to rally behind her on it? A few of us. It's just one of the tragedies, a real tragedy. They control. They control. I feel for Thelma because she carried their banner for many years when they wanted her and needed her. And now, they don't. It's bad, it's very bad to see what they're doing. It's very bad, but how can you help? We'll try it.

INTERVIEWER: Have your political views changed through the years, like from the time you first got involved in unions in the thirties up to now? Do you still feel about things basically the same way you felt then?

ROBINSON: It may change a little bit, but basically I get irked. I know what I want. And since I never was one "ism" or the other....When you get into the "isms," then you get more changes. Since sometimes that "ism" was saying what I wanted to have said, and sometimes the other "ism" said what I had to say, but as long as I wasn't in any "ism" I could really choose what I wanted to fight for. And that's not good for personal aggrandizement, but it's excellent for the soul. It's really good for that. I think when I came into the movement, the socialists were really in the forefront in Laundry.

INTERVIEWER: You said Noah....

ROBINSON: Noah Walter and Frank Crosswaithe in the ILG, and all that group, and they were really doing things. So, that was great. Then when they really went off key and didn't do and didn't fight and all that, we began to look at the Socialist Party to see what was happening there. The one that kept the faith with us, I guess, was Norman Thomas. We always could look at him. He was always out fighting some way or another. I guess our local socialists turned us off. Then we had a faction in Laundry that was

ROBINSON: communist-dominated. And, I think, their techniques--they would fight to a point, and it was very good, we liked that--but their techniques of elimination turned us off in some way. It was good because we got to know all groups of people and what they wanted to do.

INTERVIEWER: Techniques of elimination?

ROBINSON: Yeah. Um-hm. When you finish with a person, the way you eliminate them means something to me, you see. If you eliminate them without disgracing them or something, or trumping up something, at that point when you trumped up, it was dishonest as far as I could see. Because I was young in that type of thing. And that I could see because I was young and in the forefront and knew what was happening. And some of the things were not good.

And in the Amalgamated, we had both groups, very smart. The socialist group, Frank Rosenblum and his group from Chicago and all of that, very strong group. Sander Genis, you know, others that came in that were pro-Laundry workers. And then you had one of the smartest lawyers that the Amalgamated ever had, John Apt. And we knew that John was very closely connected with the Left. But I think that Hillman could use him because I think that Hillman was a smart person. I've often looked at some of the speeches that they did in those times, and they were tremendous speeches, and I'm sure that John had a lot to do with the writing of those speeches. But, I still feel that Hillman was smart enough to catch anything that he didn't want to have said or to say at that point, and that you have to be if you're going to work with people whose ideologies that are not the same as yours.

INTERVIEWER: It would seem just from my reading, since I wasn't there, that in the 1930's, unions and political ideologies, all of those people were kind of together more than they have ever been since.

ROBINSON: That's right. In the thirties--'36, '37, and all that. Sure, you look at the political situation in New York when you had the American Labor Party. At first they were all together, you see, that was the great push. And then you had the split from the American Labor Party. Then the ILG split and formed the Liberal Party. But there was a time when they were all together in New York City.

INTERVIEWER: What happened to make things split apart?

ROBINSON: You have to go back. I was treasurer of the American Labor Party in Kings County. Let me see what happened there. Ummm. Maybe, I don't know. I'd have to think about it. I'm not sure that I could say what really happened. Maybe we didn't know. All we knew was that there was a split, there were changes or things of that sort. That, I'll have to think about. I haven't thought about that in many years.

INTERVIEWER: You married someone you worked with?

ROBINSON: Yes, James Robinson, and he was connected with the Board of Education. He was in the recreation part of it. And we had activities in the public schools. Basketball and games and everything else. And he directed that, and that's how I met him. He became quite active with the union and worked with us a number of years, about five or six years I guess. And then he went on to other things, and then I married him before he left. And that's the way that was. Interesting. I hadn't thought that I'd omitted him.

INTERVIEWER: Did you feel that you had to change your lifestyle when you got married?

ROBINSON: Not really. Because we were both activists. And he was, I think probably more interested in me being really active, probably wanted more action than I was willing to give, because he was a rebel and I was sort of marking time. But, not too much. I think that what really happened was that we were too much alike. We were much too much alike, I think. That was the thing that really happened. I always respected the fact that he was a great administrator. We separated when Jan was about eighteen months. But even when I went to Washington to be with the Labor Department, and we decided to do a pilot project, a training program for domestic workers. We wrote the program. Worked with him and he was able to draft the type of program that we wanted. And then we got him to do the pilot project at the Huntington Community Center in Queens. And I did that because I knew he was a good administrator, a good organizer; knew the resources of the community and could do it. So they did do the first domestic workers training in Queens under his direction. He was a good administrator.

INTERVIEWER: So, you stayed in touch with him?

ROBINSON: Oh, yes. Oh, yes, for the child's sake, we were friendly. We couldn't live together, but we were friendly. I never believed that whatever I considered to be the faults of the male, or my husband, that I should transmit them to the child. I think the child will find out any faults soon

ROBINSON: enough. I was never critical of him. When she grew old enough, she could make her own decision, and they usually do. But as far as he was concerned, I never did criticize him. And we remained friends until he died. Every job he would go on, whatever I could do, I would help him. If I was running for office, he'd come around to distribute my literature, or something of the sort, so we really maintained a fairly good relationship.

INTERVIEWER: That wouldn't have been possible if you had remained married, probably.

ROBINSON: That's right. We would have killed each other. We really would not have been friends at all. Could not be. Because it just wouldn't work. But away, and seeing him once a year or so, when the child was young; Father's Day, he'd have to show up at Brooklyn Friends School. And I was sure he showed up there because she wanted her father to be there with her. And he was there. But, those were things that I kept in touch with him so that he could do. Because they hurt, you know, it's hurtful to a child more than it hurts you, this breakup, or estrangement or something, so she was the most important thing there. But, all three of us lived. See, if we'd stayed together, two souls would have been lost--his and mine--and probably hers, too. But this way it worked out very well, till the day he died.

INTERVIEWER: Has your daughter ever expressed any interest in going into the labor field?

ROBINSON: In the beginning, no. But, I didn't think she'd be interested in group work, or mixing and mingling with people. But recently, her job was with Girl Scouts, organizing the community and the volunteers and things of that sort. She did very well. She has high ideals so she came in touch with some of the human frailties of the people she was dealing with. People in the Girl Scouts that she felt should have higher ideals and things of that sort, so that maybe we didn't tell her too many of that facts of life. But, she did very well. She understands the labor movement, because she knows the people; she's been a part of it growing up. I remember her, I think the picture we have of Jan is at the merger of the AFL-CIO, we had this cocktail party at the Commodore Hotel. There were huge lines of people. They were going around, getting cocktails and everything, and Mrs. Hillman was there. She was about

RQBINSON: two people away. Jan was in the line, going up. And when she got to the man, he said, "Well, what do you want?" She said, "Scotch and Soda." Because that's what her father had. She'd heard of Scotch and Soda. But, she has been part of the labor movement, knowing the people, living around it. I don't think she has that real urge to organize workers, uh-huh. She worked in the Amalgamated Insurance Company for a summer.

INTERVIEWER: As far as traveling--back in the thirties and forties, when you were going down into the South and places, how did you like it? Did you usually go alone or did you travel with someone you were working with?

ROBINSON: In traveling. I liked to travel. New York, I used to go from New York to the South. I enjoyed it. However, we had many inconveniences at that time. The one period that was most interesting, I traveled with Pete Zuba, who was another organizer with the Amalgamated, and we lived in Florida. Pete had a house, I guess it was about three rooms, and I lived in an apartment. Well, he lived in a section that was white, and I had to live in the black section. I paid more for my....I didn't have an apartment, I had one room. I put a little hotplate there and cooked, and I paid more for that one room than he was paying for that little bungalow, with bedroom, kitchen and everything else. My expenses were higher than his. And I recall a question came from the [ACWA] Finance Office about some of my expenses, and I just wrote on the letter that they sent me, in red pencil, "It takes more for black America to live in the South than it does for white America." And I never had any more questions from the Amalgamated [Clothing Workers] Finance Office about my expenses in the South. We were trying to organize Miami Beach at that time and that's where we were.

The other time that I went to the South organizing a shirt factory in Montgomery, Alabama. They'd been trying to do that, and I'd been sent to organize that, to help the young people there. And that's the time I made friends with the lawyer and we were able to do something. The South was interesting. It was tight because we did make house visits, a black and white together, but it was at night and the shutters were pulled and all of that. The way we met people, we'd go by a factory and take license plate numbers and check the numbers at the Motor Vehicle Bureau, get names and addresses attached to them,

ROBINSON: and then visit those people at night. Some of the people would let us in, some would not. Some of the towns would get us out rather quickly, too. Sure, it was hard. But, it was exciting. At that age, I enjoyed it.

INTERVIEWER: What did they do to get you out of town?

ROBINSON: Some made it very unpleasant for us. I mean, we were followed. There was harrassment. And there was fear on the part of workers talking to us. And you could tell when you were not going to have any success at all. One of the first things we'd do is go to church. If you were going to be in a small town, the first thing you'd do is go to church Sunday morning so they'd know a new person was in town, and you'd try to meet people. Sometimes the blacks would wait on you and tell you that you were exposing those people to harm or to loss of jobs, and there would be a very real fear. And you did not want to take that upon yourself, you see. At the time, we were not that strong that I could say if you lose your job, we'll get you another, or we will give you help. So that we were really doing it on faith and things of that sort. I've been asked to leave towns, as politely and as nice as possible. But if you weren't out in two or three nights, you never knew what would happen.

I remember in Chattanooga, Tennessee, I lived in a place over a restaurant, and the jukebox [played] all night. And they refused to let them turn that jukebox off, just to make me uncomfortable. I was there trying to organize laundry workers. And things of that sort. There was harassment. And I think the fear [was] that you could leave the town, but these other people would have to stay. I think that was what deterred me, a great deal. Because I wanted to feel that if they had confidence in me, that I should be able to deliver something to them. And, if you weren't able to do that, then it was most unfair to the people, unless you could really get enough cards signed so that you knew you were going to make some dent. And, in Chattanooga, we did for the laundry workers. We kept going back. Then, we had a strong group of workers there. So, you were able to do something. But little places like Athens, Georgia, and places of that sort, those were difficult places at that time, very difficult.

INTERVIEWER: When did you last go to the South on an organizing trip?

ROBINSON: The last time I was in the South was 1953, um-hum, '52 or '53. No, '52, I guess. Then, I was in Florida. That's when I came up from my last trip and Pete Zuba and I had been there on Miami Beach organizing, and I came up because I was going to have my baby. And I came up then. That's right. That was my last trip to the South organizing. I went back to the South as a representative of the government many times.

INTERVIEWER: So, you were still traveling after you got married, then? You didn't let that stop you?

ROBINSON: Oh, yes. What do you think? No, I traveled. And Jim used to come down. Montgomery, Alabama; he was there quite often. In fact, he became friends with Sanderson, too. The lawyer in Montgomery, Alabama. He came down quite a bit and I traveled. Uh-hum. Nope, marriage didn't stop that. Maybe it should have. Maybe the story would have been different.

INTERVIEWER: I've always felt, to some degree, that some people don't need to see each other that frequently and still retain happy marriages. It sort of depends.

ROBINSON: It really does. It depends on the individuals. It's true. Maybe not.

INTERVIEWER: As far as the people who worked in the original laundry where you worked, did some of them remain active in the union?

ROBINSON: Yes, they did. One of the women, I mean. She became very active, but she has since died. But she came out, became active in the union, held offices--minor offices--and worked very hard to help build other units of the organization. The woman I told you....

INTERVIEWER: Charlotte Adelman?

ROBINSON: Charlotte Adelman. I told you Charlotte was still living, didn't I? She is now a real, what do you call it, hermit, I guess. She worked very hard and, unfortunately didn't reap the benefits of organization, but she certainly did sow the seed. Others? Let's see, where are others in what? They were a pretty good active bunch. I guess none of them are too active in the union now, I mean, they've retired, I guess. But that was an active shop, a good shop, the Colonial Laundry, about 300 people.

INTERVIEWER: Did you find working with laundry workers and shirt workers and people in different industries....was there any difference, were some people easier to organize than others, or did the industry have nothing to do with it?

ROBINSON: Hmmm. I think these were low-income people, and if they were in laundry, they were making low wages. And I think they had just reached the peak that they had to do something. I mean they had reached that point that they just couldn't exist on the wages and the treatment. I think that you can enslave a group of people a long time if you're treating them well. But the long hours and the treatment. The supervisors were very nasty. And they were the best organizers of a shop you could ever have. Because if a foreman is nasty, you're going to get quite some result from that shop, good results. But, laundry workers were just about the lowest income group at that particular time. Domestic workers were the next, and they still aren't organized. But, laundry workers, cleaners and dryers, that group, they were organized at about the same time. And it was because the wages were unbelievably low, unbelievably. Existence was almost, I mean, just impossible. It wasn't like you were in a hospital where you got your meals. The six dollars you earned had to purchase meals and everything, no one free meal or anything. But, I guess people were just tired and they had to do something about it. So, that laundries, cleaners and dyers--all phases of laundry--the hand ironers, you know, the shirts and all that, they were ready for organization.

INTERVIEWER: So, it was easier to organize them than say, hospital workers later on that you worked with?

ROBINSON: Let's not say easier. You can't use that word, "easier." They were ready for organization. They were willing to make the sacrifice, and conditions were so bad, I guess, that they needed to make the sacrifice. Hospital workers were a little different. You know, where you had a group of workers that are connected with professionals, it's going to be hard to organize them. Because they want to be professionals. Just like department store workers. Department store workers were the hardest people I ever tried to organize. Because they felt that they were the owners. They had just been psyched up that they were representatives of that company. And, I told you, everybody at Bergdorf Goodman thought they were Mr. Bergdorf

ROBINSON: or Mr. Goodman, they just felt that way. They were above that. And they were making the lowest wages. Low wages, but they wore white collars. And, that's that.

Hospital workers were near doctors, you know, and everything, and they wanted to be professionals and they didn't want to get out on that picket line. But then when you finally get to showing them that the money is not there and the conditions are not there, then you were able to organize them. Even the professionals. Because I told you that the psychiatric social workers and the medical social workers were the ones I organized in the whole city. So, organization is hard, I don't care where it is. It's really hard. And you never know what makes it click. You really don't, because you work hard in every situation, every one, and then one day it clicks. You get the person that can help you, or the one that can really convince people, and then they begin to believe in what you say, and that's it. Did you ever organize?

INTERVIEWER: Never. Talking about union politics, did you feel that you were able to deal with this better as a woman, or did you feel that being a woman sort of hindered you a little bit? I mean, did you feel that you were shut out of the decision-making process sometimes because men tended just to deal with other men?

ROBINSON: We were shut out! Did I feel? We were shut out of the decision-making process to a degree. Now, I'm sure we were. Because in the Amalgamated, decisions were made by the president and vice-presidents. It didn't include us. We got the decision after it was made. In Laundry Workers the Joint Board supposedly made the decisions, but it was on a caucus basis, of decisions having been made someplace and then they caucused to get the sides together and things of that sort. The only thing that we had in Laundry, that probably the old unions didn't have, was that we were very vocal in our Joint Board meetings. And the fights were very good. Now, that was the thing. I'm sure we were the most democratic unit of the organization, and that was one of the reasons why they didn't understand us too well, I guess. And probably one of the reasons why they would change supervisors and put one of their people in. Because, for a long time, an Amalgamated [Clothing Workers Union] vice-president served as head of the Laundry Joint Board. For many years. Until we held elections and then [Louis] Simon became head of it. You were receivers of decisions.

INTERVIEWER: Was there much rebellion about that?

ROBINSON: In Laundry? I think we were the most rebellious group, yes. But in the long run, we were able to really fight decisions there. We were a young, vocal group, as opposed to the seasoned leadership in the Amalgamated. We were the democratic initiative, and they were seasoned leadership. And too often there was a separation between the two, with the seasoned leadership forcing decisions on this new group, instead of the combination of the two working together and the training of the people. That's where there was very little training in leadership to really take over and run Laundry Workers. Maybe that's why they have 8,000 members now, because of leadership and [lack of] foresight, and things of that sort. Of course, the industry--the new things would cut into the industry. But young democratic initiative, ideas. New ideas would have helped the organization.

INTERVIEWER: How about as an organizer? Did you feel that you had control over what you were doing?

ROBINSON: Very much so, in our particular situation. I think I told you that I was pulled out of the shop, taken out of the shop and given a job to do. Once I went into a shop and they asked me what was policy about some situation. And, I had never heard of what policy about that situation would be. I didn't know what the policy was. But it seemed to me common sense told me that this would be policy, this would be a good way to solve that. And I went back, and that evening I went over to Mrs. Hillman's, and I was a floor sitter, and I sat on the floor and I was talking, and I explained to Mr. Hillman that I was in the shop and they asked me what was policy, and they were talking about this, and I didn't know what policy was, but I told them such and such a thing. He asked me, "What did you tell them?" And I told him this and this and this. He said, "Well, that is policy now, because I will back you in what you said." It frightened me to the extent that suppose it had not been a good decision on my part, and he would have had to back me in something wrong, then his opinion of me would have been very poor. Therefore, it made me think twice before I pulled something out of a hat unless I felt that I really had good basis for it. And, I thought that was the greatest training thing that was done to me, and I'm sorry that others were not given that opportunity. Because if the head of the whole organization would say, "Because you have said it, I will back you," it means that because he will back me

ROBINSON: I must be careful of what I say. That was good training. Absolutely. Plus the fact that he could do no wrong in my book after that. If he was going to back me, I was going to back him! Right? That's right. It was hard, but we worked it.

INTERVIEWER: When you were active in the union, did you become active in politics after, or at the same time? I know you became really active after you left.

ROBINSON: Yes, at the same time. Because, you see, Hillman organized the American Labor Party, and I lived in Brooklyn. And, those of us who lived in Brooklyn joined the unit in Brooklyn. I became treasurer of the American Labor Party in Brooklyn. Then I became very active in politics. We were active in getting people out to vote and to register. So, my political activity began while I was in the union because of the organization of the American Labor Party, then when we withdrew from the American Labor Party--Hillman withdrew.

INTERVIEWER: Why?

ROBINSON: There was a split, and their ideology and somebody else's mixed. You see, when the American Labor Party was first organized, all of the "isms" were together--the Left, the Far Left, and the Near Left and everything were over here. And then there was a split between all of these groups. I guess the Marcantonio* group took over, you see, and that would be the Left Left group, and Hillman withdrew. Others withdrew and formed the Liberal Party, but many of us went into the Democratic Party. And that's how I ended up in the Democratic Party.

INTERVIEWER: When did that happen?

ROBINSON: Gosh, what year? I don't know. I'd have to check.

INTERVIEWER: It wasn't formed until the 1940's, was it? 1940, '42, or something?

ROBINSON: No, it had to be '43, '44, or '45, something like that. In that year, but in the forties. Then, also we became active because COPE [Committee on Political Education] was formed, and when Hillman became head of the Committee

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* Vito Marcantonio was U.S. Congressman from East Harlem.

ROBINSON: on Political Education, then that's where our activities centered, and we were able then to go into our communities and back candidates, and that's what we did. We worked directly with city hall. I was assigned to work on the O'Dwyer campaign,* but I would work in the Brooklyn area. I recall that we had a great deal to say even about the appointment of judges, because I remember that Judge Page** had been appointed by [Mayor] LaGuardia and he came up for reappointment, and the influence there, I had worked with him. And I went to Blumberg and asked for his support of Page, and it was Blumberg's support of Miles Page in Brooklyn that got the reappointment for him. So, the labor movement was having its impact in communities because they were supporting and working there.

INTERVIEWER: Do you see that unions are having as much influence in politics as they used to?

ROBINSON: They probably have more. They probably have more. They've become more aware of their power, and they're probably using it to a degree. Especially as far as funds. Because, you see, the Committee on Political Education started us really in helping communities, because we would get money to help. The budget included so much for minorities. They would allot so much money to New York and the trade union people here would work here in those areas with the funds supplied by the Committee on Political Education. One: they could use the money on registration and to get out the vote. It was not so much supporting the candidates, but it was an educational thing. But you know if you're going to get people to register, you can always go back and get them to vote for the person you want them to vote for. So, that's important.

INTERVIEWER: Have you generally been more comfortable working with women, or with men?

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* William O'Dwyer's campaign for mayor of New York City.

** Judge of Domestic Relations Court. First black judge appointed by Mayor LaGuardia in Brooklyn.

ROBINSON: Men.

INTERVIEWER: Why?

ROBINSON: I find women very sensitive, and not willing to take as many chances or, I don't know. But, I'm very comfortable with men. I'm very comfortable with women now, but when I was really gung-ho, I wanted to move faster than the women wanted to move. So that I always worked with men.

INTERVIEWER: Do you find that women find you easy to work with?

ROBINSON: Women have a lot of confidence in me. Because I become a mother figure. I don't care if I'm fifteen years old or what. I mean, because I encourage women, always. That's why I told you, I became one woman in these forty-two men in forming the Pioneer Civic Association over there. I found that, maybe because of my background in the trade union movement, I was ready for the action that the men were ready to take; more so than women who had not been exposed to the politics of trade unions. I found that in trade unions, maybe it was because I was young, had the time, but I always felt there was a tendency on men's part to hold the meeting very late to get their action through, when women had to go home to children and to husbands and things of this sort. So, I became a night owl. So that I'd stay up with the men because I didn't want them to put anything over on me. I wanted to be a part of whatever was going to happen. There were a few women like that. We were giving all of our time.

As I said, when I was in the trade union movement, there was nothing that I did that wasn't connected with the union. My whole life was in it. Those of us who did that would have been better off if we'd had outside things, and not been so enmeshed in the union that we were so disappointed when things didn't go right or something of that sort. If we had had an outside interest, or a hobby, or something of the sort, probably many of us would have stayed there all of our lives. But, in many instances, as I was telling you, the Women's Trade Union League helped in that way, because you could go there and give vent to some of these things and get the guidance of an older woman who had been through it, you see, and that type of thing. But, I worked with men most of the time. I didn't find antagonism of women, though, because I'm not a harsh person.

INTERVIEWER: That's an interesting thing that's happened with CLUW [Coalition of Labor Union Women]--the relationship between women to help each other, and do that kind of thing. It is starting to emerge a little bit in CLUW. In spite of the hassles and all of that, it's still a place for people to get together and get to know each other.

ROBINSON: The students brought me the September 9th Jet, and they had a little squib that they had that "Dollie Robinson receives the first award of the Soroptimists Organization--Women Helping Other Women." I hadn't seen it. I did get the award, but I hadn't seen it in Jet. But, that's what I think the role is of a person who's been through the trade union movement. I think the role of any older person is to help that young leadership to stay there, and not to leave. You see, this is the thing. For instance, you. If I'd employed you, I would never have let you leave the Amalgamated. But to stay you've got to have some outlet, you see, or else it eats you up inside. You become a gray person.

INTERVIEWER: Your first union position was as a shop steward, right? What sort of grievances came up in the laundry?

ROBINSON: That's a good question. Let's see. Changing people from positions, from receiving to shaking. And that, you have to understand, when the clothes come up from the washing machine, girls are put around the truck to shake them out. And they shake them and assort them--the pillow cases from the towels and things of that sort. And then they're given to a group of girls who feed them into the "manglers." Employers later objected to us calling the machines manglers, because they felt that that was not conducive to good thoughts about the industry, if you're going to mangle things. Well, anyway, they feed them into the mangles. And then on the other side, people receive their things, fold them and put them on a table. And then, those people stack them and give them to the packers. So that many of the grievances involved moving from shaking to feeding to receiving, and so forth. Employers would hire new people and put them into positions, and the shakers would feel that they'd been there and should move up.

The other [type of grievance] was mistreatment by the foreman or, I guess it was intimidation or things of that sort. Making girls stay home because of small

ROBINSON: infractions of the rules, or what they considered their rules. Ah, let's see. Some grievances, fighting. Where employers had put up favorites and the girls became antagonistic and they would do little things to show their resentment. Those were the grievances. Failure to pay girls the same salaries that others were getting. Some girls working beside you would be getting the higher wages, although they came in the same time you came in, but that was a "little thing" they were doing. With the union you had certain stabilization of those types of grievances. The others? I've probably covered most of them.

INTERVIEWER: How did you go about settling them?

ROBINSON: Really through negotiation, through talk. The first step in the grievance was to discuss it with the person in charge. Then, we had a committee. You were a shop steward, but you had your committee. The committee would meet with the employer. If the employer could not, or would not settle it, then it became a grievance in another step to go to the union, and then to arbitration. Those were the larger cases involving time, hours, and pay.

INTERVIEWER: What was considered the hardest job, the one that people wanted to change from?

ROBINSON: Well, the hardest job people wanted to change to. I guess your hardest job in the flat work section was receiving, because it was hot. You see, you were getting the steam from the mangle. That, to me, was probably hard, because you were working in 106 and 126 degree heat all the time. The most skillful one was the folder, the stacker on the tables where you put the things. And the packers were mostly men.

INTERVIEWER: Was that heavy work?

ROBINSON: Yes, that was heavier work, lifting from the table. But women did it, too. We had women there who were excellent packers and stackers, packers. Then, over in the shirt section, that was a different operation. The operation of shirts, feeding and ironing shirts. Paid more.

INTERVIEWER: Now, they didn't dry things first? They took them out wet and ironed them right away, right?

ROBINSON: No, no, no, no, no. They'd wring them. Now, downstairs, you have the washers, the wringers, extractors, what do you call them? The towel fluffers, things of that sort. And those things, the towels would come up fluffed, and all you'd do was fold those. Because many people don't want towels going through a machine, getting hard, and things of that sort. They were damp, as your clothes at home would be if they'd gone through a wringer, you know, if you had the old-fashioned wringer, or even the machines that just get the water out. Then you shake them out and fold them. Because then they iron very well at that time. So, they weren't wet-wet, but you could get rheumatism from it, because you were handling all these wet clothes, one of the hazards of the job.

INTERVIEWER: So, that was a frequent thing?

ROBINSON: Yeah, yeah. Arthritis, they called it. Bursitis, whatever you want to call it. And the lifting was a problem, too. You know, you had to lift. Young people lifting all of the towels, the pillowcases, and the sheets, but that was it. Great strains.

INTERVIEWER: Were there any particular grievances that women had that men didn't have?

ROBINSON: I can't think of any in the laundry. The men suffered from the same things. I'm telling you we weren't women's libbers, we were everybody's libbers at the time. I mean that was it. Lifting was a problem with men and women, you know, really and truly. As I said before, there were some men that just couldn't lift as much as some of the women even. So, you wanted protection for all of them. In that spot, unless you were outside, drivers, naturally it depended upon what the job was, but inside, the frequency was about the same.

INTERVIEWER: Did you ever consider running for....

ROBINSON: Business agent, and things of that sort?

INTERVIEWER: Yes, an office that would, you know, move you on up the union ladder?

ROBINSON: At the time, no, because I was always supporting someone that I wanted to keep there. That was the situation. We were always threatened, thinking that the people who had really served us well were going to be ganged up on

ROBINSON: and removed. So, our job was really a supportive role to keep those people there. Now, it was a young industry, the organization was young at the time, and I guess at the time that we should have been moving younger leadership in, many of us were moving out. You see. And that is the situation. So, we really were not there when we could have been elected to offices. Maybe it was just two or three years. You have no way of knowing that. And, at the time, my one role was to be sure that I could get on the Joint Board, so at that spot I would have some say so and be able to really support those elected officials who were really serving us best. So, that was our role. Another agitation. But the time we could have elected younger officials, we probably, many of us, were not there. And it's too bad, because the young leadership we had when I was there was much, much more able than some of the younger leadership they finally took. People who had really studied the movement, worked in it, tried to advance themselves, tried to do things with themselves. But it was an element of time that was necessary. You know, in building an organization you need certain types of people, then, as it becomes more stable, you need other types, you see. And how do you move the ones who have done that spade work, that ground work? What do you do with them? We didn't know at that time. Maybe the mother organization knew. The Amalgamated had gone through the dance and they knew how to do it but, at that time, we weren't sure of where or what we could do. So no one wanted to fight the people who had really sown the seeds and done the organization. That's the thing. Maybe there was a time element, as I look back on it, maybe two, three, or four years, younger leadership would have just been able to do something about it.

INTERVIEWER: Do you ever regret that you didn't take that route?

ROBINSON: Not regret. I don't regret the moves I made because I think I made them with some thought, knowing myself. It was better for me to have a free soul, I mean being a free operator, than it would have been building up the great resentments toward some of the people that I didn't respect, and things of that sort. It was better for me, because it destroyed many people. It destroyed them. And I was younger, really much younger. However, I do feel that if in a different period of my life, I would have chosen to fight. I would have really wanted

ROBINSON: to see some leadership there. I probably would have fought. I probably would have had good support, too; at the time, a lot of support. Maybe, who knows? But I don't regret the things I did, because I had a good life. In and out of the movement. And I sort of enjoy my role now as being able to say to the movement some of the things that are wrong. And, actually, the labor movement still needs interpretation in the community. It's really, in spite of the money they have and the way they use their money, they really do not have the respect in the communities that they should have. They really don't. And it's because they have not taken time to explain to the communities what they're really all about. They've taken a rough-shod method at times, and they've taken a money role. You know, "We give you our money, so you do what we say," or something of the sort, without convincing people.

INTERVIEWER: I think there's kind of a crisis method of operation, too, going from one crisis to another.

ROBINSON: Right. Not leaving people in the communities to really be known, and to work with groups in the community so they have some input and some real control. They don't have the control they should have. I think we had more control when we were coming up, because we were really trying to convince communities that we were respectable people. That's a fact. It just was based on that. You were trying to convince people that you were respectable and that you may be able to get some help for them, you may be able to get some literature for them. You know, sometimes, you don't give people money, you give them other resources they need, rather than the money. And only a person working in the community can tell you what effect resources would have; money and that type of thing. Or sometimes you might bring in a person just to do an organizational job on something they want done. But, that's what you should do. That's the role that the labor movement should play.

INTERVIEWER: When you were talking about what the community thinks about labor unions--when you first got involved, what did your friends, your neighborhood think about unions at that point?

ROBINSON: In the beginning, they really didn't understand. They thought I was a real freak, because I was out organizing. I led picket lines; I had literature; and I always wanted people to know what we were doing at the same time.

ROBINSON: However, in the area where I lived--it was a low-income area, so they were beginning to be labor-conscious. But, as I said, always, even though I'm not a church-going person, I always tried to convince a couple of ministers of what it was all about. And then we had some who were interested. So, that's the way we did it. I would go to all churches, and I'd keep them apprised of what was happening. And I was always a little involved with the political action end of it, and we were always doing things in churches, with people, to explain issues and things. That's the role that I feel the labor movement isn't taking advantage of now. I don't see any labor people holding anything in any churches, in any community rooms. They're all doing great things, big things, but on that local level, they're not doing it. And that's the thing that I think they're missing out on. Because when they want to do a registration drive, they really can't do one. They're not doing it. Perhaps they did in the last election.

INTERVIEWER: They don't have those ties.

ROBINSON: They don't have the ties. And they can't buy the ties. And that's too bad. That's too bad. Because they waste an awful lot of money, and the result's not there. The black communities are so open for help that it's not even funny, but there's really no one there. I sometimes think that maybe they don't want to. You see, you have to think of what's the long-range program. And if you wake up sleeping dogs, you're going to have to deal with them. But if you let them sleep, you can just go ahead and forget about them. They won't disturb you, and that's the thing. I think they should. Their members live there and their members are not active. You can check and see how many trade unions have a political set-up that can tell you where their members live, what parties their members register for, and how many of their members are registered. Check the unions. There are maybe only three. The greatest one in the city for that is Sanitation. The Sanitation Union, and they do that. And that was projected almost fifteen years ago. That this is what you did. Because if workers were registered, what more would you need.

INTERVIEWER: Gerry Ford wouldn't be elected, maybe.

ROBINSON: Even with his boo-boo the other night he's still ahead. People are kidding themselves. He's still ahead. Even with his boo-boo. Because how many people listening to that broadcast knew what he said was wrong. Poland and Hungary and all. The Polish-Americans, right? I'll bet you. The Polish-Americans are not too registered. They're not registered. Maybe they've made some dent now, a little bit. And how many of them heard it, hum? Those who heard it are hoping he's right. You see? That's it. I don't know. So they say Carter won this one. We'll see.

INTERVIEWER: Aside from churches, what other kinds of community groups did you reach out to?

ROBINSON: Oh, the NAACP is a good ground in any local community. I don't know a lawyer in the black community that did not go to the NAACP to use it as a stepping stone. The Urban League was not as active, but it was also an organization that was used. Now, they catered to the industrial worker. They had people who really started working with industrial workers. And the YWCA was another group.

INTERVIEWER: Did they have the industrial secretaries when you were....

ROBINSON: Of course. Of course, they had the industrial secretaries. That's when we were able to get on their [YWCA] boards. Because they would bring us in, the industrial secretaries would bring us in, and then we would agitate for a position on the board. And then they would reach out and have just one little worker on the board. That was great. But you got there and that person learned a lot. And if they brought it back and gave it to someone else, it was very helpful. Um-hum, the Y and everything.

INTERVIEWER: Who did you learn from in organizing?

ROBINSON: Charlotte Adelman. I told you about Charlotte. I learned a great deal from Charlotte Adelman. I also learned a great deal from Bessie Hillman. Bessie Hillman was a person that would talk to you, she'd give you the history of what had happened to her. She would give you examples of it, and she was a great one for passing on her experiences on how to handle things. Plus the fact that she was an activist. I mean she wouldn't sit, she would go with you. That was the thing. She would go out in the field with you. And she loved to explain her side of it, her point

ROBINSON: of view, and listen to yours. She would really listen to yours. Charlotte was the one that was there early morning, late at night. Everything she did was for the workers. That was her life. She had no other life. None of us did. Then, Helen Blanchard was another person I learned a great deal from. She came from the Restaurant Workers [Union], but she was a part of the Women's Trade Union League.

INTERVIEWER: She was at the Hudson Shore Labor School, or was it the Women's Trade Union League?

ROBINSON: Women's Trade Union League. Yeah, she was assigned to Laundry, and I learned a great deal from her. I guess I learned a great deal from all of the people I associated with, the good and the bad. All of the business agents. I worked with Esther Peterson. She was in the Amalgamted, so we worked with her. I learned a great deal from Pauline Newman* and Freida Miller,** because I was appointed by the Governor to the Laundry Minimum Wage Board, and that was where I got to know Pauline Newman very well and Frieda Miller. They all had a part in my learning process. Who else? I told you about the Bryn Mawr school--I mean the Hudson Shore Labor School, formerly the Bryn Mawr. Let's see. Who else was around? I forget some of the names. But those are the people that really stand out. Hilda Smith, a former dean of Bryn Mawr whose home was held for Hudson Shore Labor School, was another person.

INTERVIEWER: I would really like to talk to Charlotte Adelman some time.

ROBINSON: I think what I will too some time....Charlotte's a great one. She's great, I don't know how much we can really reach her now, but I'm going to try, I'm going to try. Because she is, she was a legend. She really is. Unbelievable woman. The things she would have you do to organize a shop, I mean, were just sheer guts and grit.

INTERVIEWER: Like what?

ROBINSON: I mean, you just had to give every ounce of your time to it and everything. She was strong. She really wasn't

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* Education officer of the ILGWU Health Center.

** Industrial Commissioner of New York State and Director of the Women's Bureau of the U.S. Department of Labor in the forties.

ROBINSON: that strong. She gave the appearance of strength, you see. I guess she was the first person I ever saw that could knock a boss out physically and never raise her hand. And I never knew how she did it, and the workers would swear by her. The bosses were very abusive. They'd get very loud and raise their hands. And then you'd see he was really on the floor, and you never knew why and how. It was because Charlotte was from the West Indies and knew how to butt. And they butt with the back of their head and they never raise their hands. And to the workers, at that point, that was strength, you see. They had been taking so much abuse, and even if a boss fought them, they'd have to forego arresting him, because they wanted to work. Anyway, she was real strong. Sheer guts. And she was in a terrible area, too, Brownsville. Um-hum. Of course, you know, Brownsville was where the little gangsters and the mobs were. But she was able to hold her own. Yeah, I think she really probably influenced a lot of people. Even her enemies respected her. They had to..

INTERVIEWER: Did you ever read any books or see any movies that really influenced you to go in a particular direction?

ROBINSON: Movies?

INTERVIEWER: Any books are all right.

ROBINSON: I don't know. I don't know that any particular book did. I read an awful lot, anything I could get my hands on. That's why I should have given you one session in my house. I have one section of my books--I have a whole wall of books--one section of books is all the law books. In the other, on top are the first editions or galleys of books that were written by people like Leo Huberman, and those people who were in the labor movement; some of Joe Glazer's things that he was doing, all the things that they were doing, they would send me copies. I read everything. That was my escape, I guess. And then the other section are all the books I've ever read. Not all of them, but at some period of my life, most of them. Now, I'm on a paperback kick, escape things. I really don't know any particular book that influenced me, no. People. Always. What does a worker have? How are you going to escape if you're really poor? You have to escape through biographies and things of that sort. It was only later that I really got into the black history bit. I was in it before I left the South because it was part of our school curriculum, you know, and we just took it for granted and did it. And then later I got into that. But in that period it was just work and fight for survival.

ROBINSON: And I was out here at night school, evening school, and a black girl, we were organizing a Negro Problems Club. There was a very homely black girl, according to my standards. And she got up and she said, "You know, I am beautiful. In some parts of Black Africa, I am considered a beauty." I decided that everyone should teach every child that they're beautiful. So, that's what I did with my child. I kept saying, "Pretty, pretty." At eight months, I was teasing her, and she said the word pretty. She's never forgotten it.

INTERVIEWER: One of the questions I asked you before the tape recorder ran out of tape at that point, and I didn't get it down, was whether your daughter was brought up the same way you were, since you said your mother had a large part in bringing your daughter up, too?

ROBINSON: No, she probably was brought up with the same type of attention that I was brought up with. And the home meant a lot to us. She's a different person. Because my mother, all the mistakes she made on me, she tried not to make with Jan. But, umm, she was given more in some areas. But, as I think of it, not too much. Even though I sent her to private school, Friends, Quakers, I was still trying to get the same type of education that I had gotten in the South, where there were small classes and concern for the students. We were seeking that. Because when she started school, in my area, they were thinking about putting them on three sessions. And I remember saying that I didn't do too well with one session, how could I expect my child to do well with one-third of a session. So that, I guess even though we had to do certain things differently, we were still striving to give her the same type of thing that I had had. And we didn't do too differently with her, no.

INTERVIEWER: And she always had lots of nice home-cooked food to eat?

ROBINSON: Yes, she's a home-person now.

INTERVIEWER: During the Second World War, did you see a big pressure being put on getting more women to work, and then after the war, encouraging them to leave? Probably in the laundry and garment [industries] not so much, because people really don't do that unless they need to make money.

ROBINSON: Uh-huh. I really didn't see that.

INTERVIEWER: And always women had been the majority of people who were working there, right?

ROBINSON: Yeah. You know the only thing I can remember about that is that damn blood issue. That is really the thing. We lost a lot of people. The laundry industry was mainly female anyway. A lot of female workers, and I didn't notice that.

INTERVIEWER: In laundry, did they share the work, too? Let everybody work shorter hours before they laid people off?

ROBINSON: Maybe some plants. Not all. Not all. If all of them had been that way, we would have never been able to organize. Some plants had that paternalistic attitude, to look out for all of their people, but not all of them.

INTERVIEWER: Do you feel that's a good idea anyway, I mean, the share-the-work thing?

ROBINSON: Oh, yeah. Sure. And I think workers would do it anyway. I mean, you would rather share than to see anyone you've been working with for any length of time without. When you see people working in laundries and places of that sort, they don't want to go on welfare. I mean, they really don't want to go on welfare, because it would be much easier for them, wouldn't it? But, they don't. They are workers. So you do not want to see a person you've been working with go to that. Because you know they're too proud to go on welfare. And they would share. I mean, workers are the kindest people in the world. That's true.

INTERVIEWER: I believe that.

ROBINSON: That's true. As a worker I can tell you. That is very true. And they know if you take those low wages and those long hours, you don't want to go on welfare. So, sharing would come naturally.

INTERVIEWER: Are you still friends with any of the organizers that you worked with in the old days?

ROBINSON: Sure. You'd better believe it. Oh, for sure. I maintain a relationship with most of the Amalgamated people. The ones that were there. Laundry. Sure, Louis Simon and

ROBINSON: all of those people. And they sort of haul me out every now and then to say that I was one of them. Yeah, uh-huh. Part of my life and part of my past. And you keep up with them. You may weed out some of them, but you keep up a relationship with those that you remember and respected and liked.

INTERVIEWER: Considering all the different kinds of things that you've done, what would you consider your worst job and your best job, if you could scale them?

ROBINSON: I tell you, the worst job people would say was really a good job.

INTERVIEWER: I'm talking about your feelings about it.

ROBINSON: I couldn't say. The best job is this one now. I never saw people work so. I mean, what I do automatically. For instance, I'm not supposed to come in on Fridays. I don't work Fridays. I'm in here almost every Friday. This, they would never do. But to me, this is the easiest work I've ever had, I've ever done. The hours. And in some ways, it's rather productive, because you're able to do things with young people and share experiences with them, to keep them from making some of the mistakes that they automatically would make. They're going to make them anyway, make some. But if you can tell them some of the things that would result from one move or another, some of them sort of think again. And, we've been able to steer some of them to some very worthwhile things. And I consider this a good spot to help young people and adults, because we work with the older person as well as the young. And this is a good spot; it's a good spot for a person to use their experience in a good way. Because you can do things. The hardest work I ever did was organizing. But I must say, that I can never say I didn't enjoy it. I enjoyed every minute of it. I mean, it was good, and I still enjoy organizing. And I still organize. Not on that basis, but you still organize.

INTERVIEWER: It is hard to see how anybody could keep that energy level up throughout a whole lifetime that it takes to organize.

ROBINSON: Well, that's why you have younger organizers and old ones. You know, you are glad to become the seasoned leadership, you know. And you let them bring that democratic initiative

ROBINSON: on. Really, you live again, seeing young people. That is why I can't understand the labor movement not developing more of it. I don't see it. Now, I love the ILG's leadership training school. Because they are bringing people from the industry, even college, young people from college. They're bringing them to that institute; they're training them, and they're assigning them to locals to work. That's good. How many organizations are doing that? How many? Hum? The Amalgamated isn't. They're not. They're not training young people, and it's a shame, because this leadership will die out and then you'll have another group floundering. They perpetuate themselves and nothing else. It's unfortunate that they don't. And it's the same in the political arena. They, you don't find them sponsoring young people to take their spots. I mean, they stay there until they can't stay there any longer. They don't think of retiring or giving it over to someone; their egos get in the way. So, we have young people, they should be trained, they should be helped.

The last call I just received was from a young chap I put in the Democratic National Convention to work. Worked very well. He's a student on campus. He was editor of a magazine, really so carried away with his importance. He forgot what he was on Brooklyn College campus for. To get an education. So, he wanted the Convention; I got him the Convention. Then, I asked him, because I had picked up his transcript, and I wanted to ask him how he thought he could stay here as a student with his marks. And he was embarrassed, and we got to talking, and I told him your first job is to yourself. You know, you can be a big shot on campus, but if I can go pull your transcript and find out that you're an F, D, C student, someone else is going to do it, and no one is going to respect you. So this year, well, he wanted to work on the campaigns. And I said, "Now, I wouldn't work in the campaigns. You did enough at the Convention. You'll get enough results from that for a lifetime almost. Your job is to study." This year he's buckling down; he's studying. He's politicking a little bit, but he is doing his work. And that's the thing that's very important.

If the labor movement would take people like Bette Craig, who is so concerned, and let them make a few mistakes, get under people's hair, I mean what's it going to hurt if you ask a lot of questions. Who's it hurting? It makes

ROBINSON: the people stop and think, right? Well, they don't want to think. What's that going to be? In ten years, they'd have a good person who would believe in their organization. And why would you believe in their organization? Because they let you through, right? If they let you through, with all of the things, all the things you were doing and able to do, you could believe in them, right?

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