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

ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

Oral History Interview

with

DORIS TURNER

Drug and Hospital Workers' Union

by

Cindia Cameron

Program on Women and Work

Institute of Labor and Industrial Relations

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VITAE

DORIS TURNER

Doris Turner was born in Florida on June 20, 1930, and was raised by her grandmother who had a profound effect on her childhood experience. When she was seven, Turner and her grandmother moved to New York City to join her mother and uncles.

While she was growing up in Harlem, Turner often dreamed of becoming an interior decorator; instead she married at the age of 20. In 1956 she went to work in the dietary kitchen of Lenox Hill Hospital so that she would be able to buy fabric to sew household items and clothes for her two daughters. The job was supposed to be temporary, but she remained at the hospital for five and a half years.

In the hospital Turner was exposed to bad working conditions and learned that a weekly salary of thirty dollars was insufficient to meet the basic living needs of herself and her co-workers. At one point, she and the other women staged a walk out to protest low wages and the fact that only the men workers were given meals by the hospital.

In 1959 Turner joined District 1199 of the National Union of Hospital and Health Care Employees, and participated in a 46-day strike of Lenox Hill. As a result of her union activities, she was fired from her job but was reinstated seven months later. Shortly afterwards she accepted an offer from District 1199 to become a full-time organizer for the union.

In 1963 Turner was honored by the Central Labor Council as trade unionist of the year. She attended the Women's Conference in Houston in 1977. At the time of the interview she was involved in organizing the 1978 strike at Francis Shriver Nursing Home. She is currently the head of the Hospital Division and an executive vice-president of District 1199.

Turner believes that more women should become active and take on leadership roles in unions. Although she sees the union as a very important vehicle for social change, she warns that if workers are not prepared to struggle, they will not be able to make changes improving working conditions.

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INTERVIEWER: Why don't you start telling about your grandmother who raised you?

TURNER: I'm always glad when people ask me that. My grandmother was, and I guess still is, my favorite person. She had a profound effect on my childhood life. I was raised by her. She was one of those people who always seemed to know what to do and what to say. Yet she had such great ability to deal with life and its many problems. I think what was so remarkable about her was that she couldn't read or write. She never went to school. Her grandmother was a slave who gave birth to thirteen children. My grandmother had nine children. So they both knew about raising children. My grandmother's grandmother was a midwife. Raising children and raising crops was, I guess, the thing they knew best. I came a long way as her, well I guess, like youngest child. Of course I was her youngest child and in that sense I was like an extension of her very own family, her own children. She was an able grandparent without going through all the hectic things that parents go through. She took very good care of me. We were poor; we didn't have anything but I didn't know we were poor. As I think of it, it was probably the happiest time of my life. I particularly enjoyed stories my grandmother used to tell me.

INTERVIEWER: What kind of stories would she tell you?

TURNER: Oh, she'd tell me lots of stories. She used to tell me stories about her grandmother. Even though her grandmother had thirteen children she only got to raise two of them and the rest were all sold into slavery. The old lady was allowed a great deal of freedom because she was a midwife, so they'd run all over to deliver babies. So she managed to get along pretty good under the circumstances. The favorite story about her children being sold into slavery was this time when they took her off to sell her and her children. She had a baby in her arms and a little fellow. The person who bought her and the baby in her arms didn't

TURNER: want to separate her and the baby. But he didn't take the little fellow. So somebody different was taking the little fellow. There she was losing yet another child. However, as she was in the wagon that they used to haul the slaves around in, she looked up the road a long way and she could see something. As she got closer, she said, "That looks like my child." And closer yet, she said, "Yes, it is my child." Sure enough, as the wagon approached, the kid jumped off the fence he was sitting on, ran to the wagon, and they were reunited. Of course the man who had bought her was happy to have another slave for free. So he was back with her; she was able to raise him. She raised these two children. My grandmother had no sisters and brothers. She was the only child.

INTERVIEWER: So how did she end up in New York? Or is that where you were born?

TURNER: Well, no, I wasn't. I was born in Florida. That's a story in itself. You know they lived in Alabama--Montgomery, Birmingham, places like that. My grandmother married two men who worked on the railroad, which was very important work for a black man. She was just removed from slavery, blacks were working on the railroad, and any black doing that job was doing well. She had nine children, five by her first husband who died. Then she married another man and had four children. Her second husband died so she really sort of raised these nine children by herself. Can you imagine, in those days?

INTERVIEWER: How did she do it?

TURNER: She washed and ironed. She raised money; and of course, you know, in those days people almost always had little plots of land and they would raise vegetables and stuff; feed the kids that way. She did washing and ironing for the white people. The good white folk would give you some clothes, and it was warm weather, so you didn't have to worry about coats and heavy clothing. All of these things helped cut down on the expense and add to the income, making it possible for her to raise her children, and she was able to do it. She also ran a boarding house. She tells the story of this man in her boarding house who used to put syrup on everything. We used to think this was so funny. What kind of silly man was he? He put syrup on everything--fried chicken, collard greens, black eyed peas. It was all such good food that we couldn't understand why he put syrup on it. We could have understood if all he ate was waffles and pancakes. She used to tell us stories about him and some of the others. At one point she used to run a boarding house, cooking for and feeding these men who were railroad men. The two and three bucks a week also included a room, and they were between runs.

INTERVIEWER: Did she ever talk about there being a railroad union?

TURNER: No. If there were any unions, she didn't know about it, and they certainly didn't belong. I doubt if she knew about unions or if

TURNER: the men knew very much. It was pre-A. Philip Randolph. The fact of the matter is that on the railroad, like in most other industries where railroads existed, I guess the black folk just didn't belong to them. The only involvement, the best I can piece together, is that they were used often as strike breakers during that time. They probably didn't know anything about it because she never mentioned it and she had an excellent memory up till her death. She died in 1961 at the age of 92. She used to tell all these stories time and time again. It was just fantastic to listen to the things that happened. She would tell us the story about this old lady who was the, I guess, the concubine of the master. And she had all these children for him. And he gave her a house, because he was really fond of her. He gave her a house for her children. And before he died, he gave her the deed to the house. So she had the deed in her apron pocket. The white folks from town used to come periodically trying to take the house away from her. She would always show them the deed and they would have to leave her alone and go away. Finally, she was lighting the fire. you know, people washed in pots, and you put a fire under the pot and boiled the clothes. So this old lady took the paper--she couldn't read and write either--and lit the fire for her pot. So the next time when they came, she couldn't show them the deed, so they took her house away. All those kinds of stories she used to tell.

INTERVIEWER: She was born after the Civil War? She had gotten those stories from her mother?

TURNER: Yes. She got them from her grandmother. She had nine children; some of them died very young. Two or three, I think, died very young. There was a flu epidemic and several of them died. She said one time she had three bodies in her house at one time. You know, because people at that time used to keep the bodies in there at that time. I think her husband and two of her children died. She lived to be a strong woman though; people all around used to look to her to answer the questions that would be perplexing to the rest of us. And she used to quote the Bible. She couldn't read and she couldn't write, but she could tell you everything in the Bible. She always had some saying that was appropriate for every situation. When you would tear your clothes she would say, "Go sew this. 'A stitch in time saves nine' If you sew it now, it won't tear up, and you'll have it." And she used to say, "'Waste not, want not.'" She said there are plenty of hungry people in the world and you shouldn't waste. She moved from Florida to New York because three of her children came to New York: my mother and two brothers. Another daughter went off to Ohio. She came to New York because my mother, I'm told, was her youngest child, so she followed. I guess all these reasons caused her to come to New York where my mother was. She got to New York and began to keep house for two uncles. They weren't married at that time. One was divorced and the other never married. So she kept house for them. And were we ever glad! Because you could always go eat good food at her house. She was

TURNER: the best cook ever. Monday nights she made gumbo. That was from the food that was left over from Sunday. She went back to Florida in early 1960 and she died in November 1961, just before Thanksgiving. We think it was because she was no longer active. She was keeping house until she died, except for that period when she went to Florida. My aunt, whom my grandmother went to live with, kept her own home, even though my grandmother was keeping house in New York. When she moved to Florida, my aunt did everything, and we think she died because she had nothing to do.

INTERVIEWER: How did she react to what was happening to you at the hospital in 1959?

TURNER: That was funny. The thing I remember most about what she said was, "No woman in my family had ever branched out to do anything that took her away from raising children." I mean, raising crops and raising children was the thing. My mother didn't raise crops, but she raised children.

INTERVIEWER: Was that laid heavily on you, that women are to raise children?

TURNER: Yes. At that time we had gotten away from crops, but it was definite that you raised children. The very idea of leaving your children, abandoning your children, to go out at all hours of the night and stuff, and early in the morning, and staying out, and all this kind of thing; and going to jail yet! What? It was kind of difficult. But the thing I remember most was she said, "Oh, my God!"--because in 1959 she was still in New York, and by this time I guess she was about ninety years old. I guess I enjoyed a favorite spot in her heart and so if she thought anything was going to happen to me it was just the world's end. She said to me, "You can't go out there and fool with that white folk's stuff! They will get you. They will hurt you." And she was really and sincerely concerned about what was going to happen to me.

INTERVIEWER: She saw the union as "white folk's stuff"?

TURNER: No, what she saw was not the union but what we were trying to get as white folk's stuff. They had had it all these years, and they weren't about to concede it. And anybody who was trying to get it from them would get hurt. That's how she saw it. And she thought that me out there, encouraging insurrection, getting involved in all these things, oh, they were going to kill me for sure. And that was going to be the end of me.

INTERVIEWER: Aside from you getting involved, if it had been someone else, would she have said, "Yes, those hospital workers, those blacks, those Puerto Ricans should have it, too!"?

TURNER: Yes. She always said that before the end of time--this is another one of her sayings--the bottom rail shall come on top. The bottom rail, as far as she was concerned, was black folk.

TURNER: Okay? So she felt it had to be, and she would encourage that. What she couldn't understand was the whole union business: my getting involved, and trying to take things. She couldn't quite get it together about how all this was supposed to happen. Remember, she was 91 years old, and she couldn't quite figure out how this was to happen, although she wanted to see it happen. She thought that it was time but she didn't know how, and she didn't know this was the way. And not being involved only compounded the confusion, you see, because she thought something was going to happen to me, and that was more important than anything. I used to sort of laugh and kiss her on the cheek. The family said that I could melt her heart. She'd wave me away and say, "Go on, girl, with your crazy stuff." She realized that I was going to go anyhow. So while she was dying, I guess on one side, as a mother, I can appreciate now what she was going through at that time. She still felt that what I wanted to do I had to do. She just didn't want to see me get hurt.

INTERVIEWER: How did she feel about your going to work? Did you have children then?

TURNER: Yes, in 1959, I surely did. I had two children, one nine and one seven. I was always, I guess what was considered a good mother. At that time that meant staying home, that meant cooking and cleaning, washing and ironing, making sure the kids looked well and healthy, seeing that they got to school. All the things that good mothers did. I never stopped really doing those things--maybe not with the same intensity, however, because I couldn't do both. So while I never really abandoned the children, they considered anything that took you away from the children for any length of time abandonment. So I was accused of that. My grandmother didn't really accuse me. She said, "You know, we always take care of our children and I just don't like you leaving those kids. Nobody else is going to take care of them like you." And she was always so proud of my children, because she felt that they looked good, they were well fed, well taken care of, and she thought that was great. Now all of a sudden, I'm doing this other thing that was going to take me away from home. She wasn't too happy about that. She said that she would take the children. So while she is saying "no", she is saying "I want to help you." It was just, I guess, a mixed up thing in her mind.

INTERVIEWER: It was more for the kids, than that women shouldn't go out and work.

TURNER: I think she was concerned that a woman should take care of her family. Now had I no family, perhaps there wouldn't have been any thoughts other than my safety. When you put all that together in the mind of a 91 year old woman who's seen all kinds of violence, and all kinds of things happening to black people in this country, it was enough to cause her some concern. Of course she didn't live long enough for me to explore this more with her. And then on top of it, the last couple of years, year and a half, she

TURNER: was in Florida, so I couldn't really talk to her. I am often very sorry about that, because my mother didn't live either, to get involved with me, and to see me, to talk to me about it, to do any of those things. My mother died when I was seventeen.

INTERVIEWER: I would kind of like to go back a little bit. You were born in New York?

TURNER: No, I was born in Florida.

INTERVIEWER: And your parents moved to New York?

TURNER: Yes, my mother. My mother and father divorced when I was a little girl, a tiny girl, and my mother came to New York to get a job and to be with her brothers, who were already here. I was still in Florida with my grandmother. Then, eventually, we came here.

INTERVIEWER: Your mother came here to work?

TURNER: She came to get a job. There weren't many jobs in the South for blacks, period--certainly not for black women--except cleaning house, washing and ironing.

INTERVIEWER: Did she move to get away from the South or did she just have to move?

TURNER: I think she started out feeling that there had to be another way. But what happened was one of the fellows who knew her in Florida followed her to New York and he convinced her to marry him. She did and had three more children.

INTERVIEWER: So she was at home while you were being brought up to New York?

TURNER: She remained home but lived with my grandmother.

INTERVIEWER: What was going on in the neighborhood while you were growing up?

TURNER: When we first came to New York we lived on Graham Court on 116th Street and Seventh Avenue. Then we lived on 119th Street and then on 118th Street between Lenox and Fifth. It was really very nice. My uncle was a part of the show business crowd, so he had a couple of dollars and he could afford to live in a fancy place. So when my grandmother and I came here we moved into Graham Court with him. It was so nice, with doormen and all kinds of stuff. We could ride up in the court in taxis. I had never seen anything like that before in my life.

INTERVIEWER: How old were you when you first came?

TURNER: I was seven. When we came to New York, my mother and I lived on 119th Street. Shortly after that she moved to 48 West 118th Street. She moved because I was at first going to live with her. However, I just normally drifted back to my grandmother's house.

TURNER: It was quite comfortable for me and my grandmother to do so. My grandmother lived with my uncle at the time and he moved out because she was there, so they moved side by side. So while I physically slept at my grandmother's house, she lived next door to my mother. Shortly after that my grandmother moved to 56 and 58 West 118th Street, next door. That's 114th Street between Seventh and Eighth, right across from the old Wately High School. This block has been dubbed the worst block in the city of New York. I remember the women going in to put in the single figures, trying to make money. And everybody's father--if he was lucky, he would have a job--coming home from work, or if he didn't have a job, sitting on the stoops. That whole business that you get, you know, in that kind of neighborhood. But we didn't think of ourselves as poor. We didn't think of ourselves as poor at all. We had lots of fun. We made the big hopscotch boxes, and we played hopscotch and jacks--all the games that kids play. Everybody's mother knew everybody's mother, and father, and all the ladies got together to supplement the family budget and play the numbers. And sometimes the food would burn because they were busy trying to figure out which number was coming next. And there would be panic in the house to straighten things out before--if your father had a job--he got back, and certainly if he didn't have a job what to do about this food that was burned. It was a real whole thing.

INTERVIEWER: What was your idea when you were in high school: to get out and get married and have kids or to go to training school?

TURNER: Both my mother and my grandmother said going to school was important. They were a strong enough combination and I was convinced it was the thing to do. I thought it was a good thing to have children--get married first and have children second. "First comes love, then marriage, then the baby carriage," was a popular saying in those days. However, my grandmother kept saying, you know, it was such a disgrace should you have a baby and not be married. It didn't matter who you married (laughs) as long as he was a nice fellow. And so I got married and I had two children.

INTERVIEWER: How old were you then?

TURNER: I was twenty at the time. I thought that I wanted to be an interior decorator. That's what I thought. Then I said, you know, "Wait a minute. Where you going to get a job being an interior decorator? Are you kidding? You'd better be a school teacher." But I didn't want to. You know, being a school teacher is nice, but I didn't want to be a school teacher. I wanted to be something different. I thought that being an interior decorator was exciting. I thought I had ability--I used to draw all kinds of things. I later found out that we had an artist in our family, although he was never recognized. I guess that some of that strain ended up with me. And I had a doll. Now this was the prettiest doll. She was straight up and down, but she was pretty

TURNER: and I used to make clothes for that doll. That doll had all the clothes in the world. Every time there was a scrap of something, I made fancy things for her. And I would design all these clothes. So I felt that I could design stuff. I thought that I could be an interior decorator and/or designer. I would design fancy houses and all these things, and I would have six children. And I wanted them all to go to school and be very learned; I wanted them to be very happy, and I would be the good mother. I'd be an interior decorator, and that would pay for the schooling--wouldn't have any problems with that. Those were the things I used to dream as I lived in a railroad flat on 114th Street--just dreams--never thinking that any part of those dreams would come true, except maybe the six children. That part didn't come true either. (laughs) But I enjoyed it. I know a lot of people in that block, some of whom I still have a relationship with. Some of them are doing good things for themselves and for their families, for their community. I think it stemmed from the fact that they were just aggravated over the kind of thing that they grew up with. After they began to understand that, they decided to make any contributions they could.

INTERVIEWER: Was there political activity or any kind of movement or organization in that community when you were growing up?

TURNER: No. What you thought about was how you were going to eat and pay the rent and stay one step ahead of the landlord. That's all you knew.

INTERVIEWER: You didn't think about who the landlord was . . .

TURNER: No. It's funny; we had a conversation here about who owns what, and I was saying that all we knew was a guy came to collect the rent. Now he didn't have to be the owner, but to us he was the culprit. Okay? The guy who owned the candy store--big deal, he was a terrible fellow. The guy who owned the little corner grocery store--they were the terrible people. As if they really owned or controlled anything. But that's how you know. These were the people you see, so these are the people you relate to.

INTERVIEWER: Just like your supervisor is the worst, the demon . . .

TURNER: That's exactly right. And so we used to talk about that. People weren't really involved in politics, as much. My grandmother said that you ought to vote if you could. She thought that was important, that you could change things. "Lincoln freed the slaves," she said, "and that's because he was a good president; we have to have good presidents." I didn't argue with her about those facts. I simply said, "You're right, we have to have good presidents, and we have to vote in order to get them elected." Except I don't think she ever voted. She thought that was for the younger folk. I know my mother did. The minute I was old enough to vote, my father took me to register, and he did the same thing with my sisters, which was great! So it was like my grandmother had said it, and he was making sure it would happen. And I did the same

TURNER: thing with my children. I'm none the worse for that part, but I don't know if I've succeeded in electing any of these good presidents. (laughs)

INTERVIEWER: It seems that there was a real sense of community where you lived, but not necessarily a sense of being organized to do anything but keep yourselves together.

TURNER: That's right. The organization was a neighborhood organization in the sense that if Mrs. Jones fell down, the other women went to help take care of the children, to cook the food, and do those things. People helped each other. They didn't know how to go beyond the community, many of them. And the few who did had a hard time trying to make a living and convincing the others--it was really a struggle to do all that.

INTERVIEWER: Were there people that you knew, in your school, on your block, that you saw going out, trying to do things? Do you remember those people?

TURNER: Yes. I remember--just vaguely--I remember a lady who used to come to school all the time, and she said that she was unhappy about the schools. Now my mother and father believed in the schools more than anybody. But this lady would make a lot of noise, and I remember there was a teaming up by her and my parents and a couple of other people in the block to go to school. It made some impact, but, you know, it lasted as long as they were there and then sort of disappeared because there was no real organization.

INTERVIEWER: What was the issue they were there about?

TURNER: It was something about something that wasn't happening in school the way they felt it should. It had to do with.... It was generally reading and arithmetic. We couldn't read the way they thought we ought to be able to read, and we couldn't do arithmetic without counting on our fingers or something, and they felt that we ought to be able to count. My father could count any bunch of numbers you wanted without a pencil or paper, and without his fingers. So he just felt that anybody should be able to do that. I was able to because he taught us how. But the school was upset, because they wanted to do it their way. And that's what it was. He ran into all kinds of problems because people in that neighborhood, some of them would like to teach their children what they thought was a better way, and the school was teaching their way, and there was a conflict. And we'd get yelled at in school, and that's what happened. That's what it was. That's about the extent of it. Now my mother was a very able woman. She made sure that whatever she thought we were entitled to, we got. Now my father--who, of course, was not as hysterical as my mother could be--but as calm under any circumstances as anybody in the world could be. But you couldn't talk him out of anything that he felt he was right. So what he did was

TURNER: if he felt there was something we were entitled to or whatever, my mother would go screaming around [and] he would just be calm and explain it to you. You couldn't argue with him. And he's that way to this day. He's in Florida now, and is involved--by the way, this is my stepfather, not my father. My mother and father were divorced when I was a very little girl and my mother remarried this man that I am talking about--he is now the supervisor of a school for dropouts. And he's a fantastic man in the sense that.... Now you think I say that about all the members of my family. Not really, not everybody. But he just has such great foresight. He was able to teach us so many things. You see, he is a tailor by trade and used to make things. And we thought it was great. He made this little pair of pants, I'll never forget. This pair of pants was all of about 1 1/2 feet high. And they were prefect pants with the pockets, the watch pocket, the whole bit. So he taught us all how to sew. Everybody can sew. Everybody can count without a pencil and paper. He made sure we did our lesson at night. We had to shine our shoes before we went to bed, and lay out your clothes for school the next morning. And have breakfast and wash the dishes before you left for school. And for the little time that I lived with them--because they lived next door--but there were periods when I did live in that house with them, but when they moved down to 114th Street I began to live with them totally. They felt that I should live with them; it was a big enough house. It didn't last very long, because I ended up going back to my grandmother. And I got married from my grandmother's house. Not from my mother's house. But all those basic, fundamental things were things that he taught me. It took me until a couple of years ago to realize that I didn't have to shine my shoes every night. I was so conditioned to shining shoes! Every night before we went to bed. And lay out our clothes. You dare not wear anything that wasn't pressed properly, that the hem wasn't straight. All those things were very, very important. And to this day, if you look at him--he's sixty something now--he has just very simple dress, but he's always as neat as he can be. And I remember my mother and he used to cook on Saturday nights for Sunday and they would be in the back. My mother didn't drink anything and my father drank beer. So he was going to introduce her to drinking--why I'll never know--but he said brandy was good. And so she tried to drink brandy. And she giggled, you know, and we thought it was funny, because we could hear them--in a railroad flat, you know, you can hear--and so she would be giggling, and he'd be laughing. She was giggling about the brandy. My father used to listen to Gabriel Heater on the radio every night. Every Friday night he'd go to the five-and-dime and get us all something. The older kids always ended up with a book. After you got a certain age, you got a book which you must read by the next Friday. The younger kids just got toys. One time there was a fight on the street. You know how kids get into squabbles. I'll never forget one particular fight that we had. The way he'd solve problems, you see.... I don't even remember what the issue was, but this was very important, we were actually fighting, and so he said to us, "Okay,

TURNER: fight, but first let's go inside the candy store." And we went inside the candy store and I got the bag of candy to divide with my friends. And somehow the fight became unimportant. Yes, I guess in many senses it was just a typical childhood, typical of people who lived in Harlem and other poor communities in the city, in the big city.

INTERVIEWER: But your father was always working.

TURNER: Yes, my father always seemed to have a job. How I don't know, as I look back. I remember he was working the WPA, those early years, but we never had to wear those clothes. You couldn't remember this but they had this special fabric to make all these clothes and give them to people. But we never had to wear them. I thought that was so good--we were rich, because I didn't have to wear those clothes. (laughs) Because my father could make things, you see, that helped a great deal. And he always managed to have a job, because he was that kind of quiet but aggressive person. He always managed to find a job: making clothes, altering clothes, pressing clothes. Sometimes he'd have to go far away to work, but he'd find it. Well, this was like in the late thirties and early forties, so it wasn't quite as bad as earlier, really.

INTERVIEWER: And what happened to your mother?

TURNER: She broke her leg and died. Gangrene, would you believe? In 1947. She was very young at that time, I think about 37. It was unbelievable; we expected she was going to be all right and come back. And you know how she broke her leg? In her house! We had an icebox, and the icebox used to leak--you know how the ice melts--and it rotted the floor, and she stepped there and as she did, the floor gave way and she fell and broke her leg.

INTERVIEWER: How did your family take that? One of those things that can just happen? Were you outraged about the floor, or the hospital?

TURNER: We did more talking about it than we did any actual things. My father--by the way, we thought we were losing him too, my stepfather. You've never seen more love between two people than between them. I told you, he followed her from Florida to here. I think that's one of the reasons he always had a job. He was persistent in making the best life he could for her and his children. He was just destroyed when she died. The most difficult thing for us was to watch him. Because she was dead. But to watch him. Then I used to make his bed, because I stayed close to him once my mother died. I used to be the lady of the house--take care of things. I used to make his bed, and his pillow would always be wet, every morning. And he'd have my mother's picture under his pillow. And he just changed--was much different than he ever was before--so much until we could hardly recognize him. My mother had more things when she died which she never had a chance to use, because he would always bring her a present, too. So she had beautiful nightgowns, and boxes of candy--of course we ate

TURNER: that up. He worked a lot of hours to get that money. He worked Saturdays to make more money. And I guess that's how he got all those extra things.

INTERVIEWER: But it was sorrow and anguish and not anger he felt about the way your mother died?

TURNER: Yes, it was anguish. That's exactly right.

INTERVIEWER: He didn't blame the hospital or . . .

TURNER: No, because it was almost par for the course. I mean, people just died and you just accepted it. I know we felt that it shouldn't have happened, but you didn't blame anybody. It happened, what can you do? So you go on. You don't blame anybody. She's gone, you can't bring her back. That kind of thing.

INTERVIEWER: That seems very different from a community that felt like that: people who did the best they could and didn't look to get out, and didn't blame anybody, didn't get in an uproar over the hospital or the floor or the refrigerator--compared to you, when you were working in the hospital. You and the people that you worked with decided that you could do something, that a union would change the situation, that you weren't going to work for thirty dollars a week. What was the difference?

TURNER: It was part of my grandmother again, I guess. Because she could never accept the injustices. She used to talk about her grandmother's children being sold and about the other kinds of things, like the woman losing her house. She would talk with a sense of outrage that those things could happen. She didn't know what she could do about them or if we could ever do anything about them, but she kept hoping that the bottom rail would come on top. That was her way of saying these things would get right. There would be an evenhandedness of things. It wouldn't be some on the bottom and some on the top. And in her daily life she didn't believe in injustice. I'm talking now about the neighbors. If one treated one unfairly, she was on the side of the one who was mistreated. The grocery man.... She couldn't read or write, but she could count her money, and you couldn't cheat her out of one cent. So she was against those injustices that to many, I guess, would be very small but that was big in her life, because that was all there was. That's something she could deal with. I guess I just came along at the time when I could be involved in that side, as my children can be involved in other things. And as their children, chances are, will be involved in other things. Because the times change, and as the times change, things change. What we did in 1959, chances are we couldn't have done in 1949 or 1939 in hospitals. That has to do with it.

INTERVIEWER: What do you think it was about the times or about the hospital or about your position; or were you aware in 1958 that the time was now or that something was different?

TURNER: No, I just knew that it shouldn't be. I never thought it should be, even in 1859. I didn't know if I could do anything about it, but I sure wanted to. And when I heard there was somebody who wanted to help hospital workers.... I had a neighbor who told me that a union is the only answer and he knew such a union for us. I said, "Really?" and he said, "Yeah, that's the only answer." "Well," I said, "That's what we need then," and when I heard about 1199 and then met some of the people from 1199, they sort of reaffirmed what he said. They said they had an interest in us. I felt that the injustices were too many. I didn't know what I could do about it. I didn't even know if with this union we could do anything about it.

INTERVIEWER: Was that the first you had heard about unions, or did you have a sense of them?

TURNER: Oh, I'd heard about them, but I hadn't been involved. You hear both, about how good they are and how terrible they are. But I'd never been involved, so I had no way of knowing. However, my friend told me that this was the way for us.

INTERVIEWER: This was someone who was in a union?

TURNER: Yes. He still is. In fact, he's business manager for an IUE local. He was a neighbor, and he said, "Doris, this is the only way." And I said okay because he was a friend and I had faith in him, and I also knew of his activities in the union. And he seemed so strong and so dedicated to this idea. "If he feels that way, there must be something to it. So let me try and see--with the union." I mean, I wanted to but I didn't know how. But he had faith in the union and said it was the answer, so I put the two things together and that was the way to go. I didn't know whether we were going to come out with our whole skins or not. I didn't think about that. I just knew that if it was going to stay the same, it would have to stay the same after the fight.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think it was a sense of outrage that made people willing to do it, or it was a sense that unions really <u>can</u> do something, or a combination of unions and civil rights then?

TURNER: I think it was a combination of unions and civil rights that did it, but it was mostly, "I'm tired, get off my back," and so forth that started it. I mean it was just enough things. And various people thought about these various aspects in different ways. Some put one more important than the other, but a combination existed, I think, for most people.

INTERVIEWER: Seems like you are saying that outrage was what did it.

TURNER: Well, I think it was outrage, because I always remember my grandmother saying, "You're no better than anyone else, but you're just as good." That was always what she said. You know, I

TURNER: remember all the things that she used to say. I tried to live by them as best I could. So I was able to reach back in that little bag of things that she said and use them as a guide from time to time. "What would I do in a situation like this?" Well, why is it some should have all and others should have none? And so, if that's not the way it should be, you don't change things by sitting and waiting, you change them by doing. There it was, a natural. As I said I didn't know what was going to happen. I knew time for a change was overdue. It should never have been this way in the first place, in my book. It's funny. I was telling some workers not too long ago.... I have a little plaque that says something I thought was applicable. It says that, "The only fight that you're sure to lose is the one you never fight." And I have used that. And if we didn't win anything, at least we had to take a chance and see. We didn't know when we got involved in this union whether we were going to have our jobs back or not. And there were plenty of people telling us we weren't. But there was enough injustice, in my opinion, to take any chances on the union. When we get to that point of this thing I am going to tell you some of those injustices. Things that will probably be hard to fathom.

INTERVIEWER: What kind of work, if any, had you done before you went to the hospital? What circumstances made it necessary? What expectations did you have about this paying job?

TURNER: I hadn't done very much. Oh, I have to tell you how I got into the hospital. My mother died and I took over the responsibilities. My sister is eight years younger than me--the next one. So if I was seventeen, she was nine. So I took over that responsibility. My grandmother was too old, so I took over--two sisters and a brother. That's what I did until I got married. Because my grandmother felt that unmarried young women could get into trouble, especially if I continued playing house, looking after kids. So she thought getting married was the respectable thing to do. And there were some suitors coming by. That only made her more anxious to get me married off. To make sure I did not get pregnant and not be married, she thought I'd better get married.

INTERVIEWER: So she picked him?

TURNER: In a sense. I thought he was all right. He was a nice enough fellow and all that. He said that he wanted to marry me, and I thought he was okay. I'm not sure what I thought, except that it seemed the thing to do, and that's what I did. After I got married, of course, I lived with my sisters and brothers. We just continued with the family until we eventually moved out. This was when my sister was about sixteen. So they were big enough then that they could manage with my father. But when I got married the idea was to raise children. So my dreams of being an interior decorator were shot. My father I knew could be of no help, my grandmother was too old, so this meant whatever happened, happened. The dream had disappeared. Of course my husband didn't

TURNER: make a lot of money either. He was a member of District 65. That was some of my first real information about unions. My husband belonged to District 65 and I got to know about District 65 and felt it was a good union. And I knew that we could go to the doctor, and the health plan would pay your bills. I thought it was really excellent. That was really my first introduction to a union.

INTERVIEWER: That was as the wife of a union member.

TURNER: That's all. That was my role. I never equated it with anything I could do or related it to anything I would do.

INTERVIEWER: Did it seem like a man's world to you, or were there women in his local?

TURNER: I didn't know about them because what I knew was as a wife and, you know, you're at home. You read the union paper a little bit, but you didn't see a lot of things, and there were more men who were union reps and union officials. And so what you really saw was men. And I wasn't working, so.... But I remember this, though. I remember saying to my husband--the union meetings used to be on Saturday--I remember encouraging him to go. I thought that he ought to know everything about that union, since he had to pay dues. I thought that he should go and find out. I used to try to make sure of that, and he used to go. He was never active or anything, but he used to go to the union meetings. So that was my knowledge, my sum total knowledge, of unions at that time.

Then, of course, when I went to work.... I went to work because I wanted to buy some fabric. I was still thinking about it in my mind that I was going to branch out and really do this thing, but I liked to decorate. We had a little apartment, my first real big apartment, in the projects. And so I wanted to decorate it. I went to the Salvation Army and bought a couch for $22. The man had some fabric. I bought it and I made drapes and a cover for this old couch to match, and it looked real good when I finished. I was a bargain-hunter. I used to go to the Goodwill store and I'd make the kids a dress for 49¢. I'd buy a yard of pique and sew each one of them a dress. So they had lots of dresses, because for a dollar I could get two dresses. So every week they got a new dress. And that's what I was doing. Finally I wanted some material, I wanted to make some more things. So one of the women living in the building where we lived said, "Listen, they got a job over here where I work, at Lenox Hill Hospital. I can speak to the supervisor." "Would you?" "Yeah." "How much do they pay? Thirty dollars?" "Yeah." "I don't have to support anybody, you know, so thirty dollars is a supplement." And I was only going to work there, you see, for about a month, just to get this money to buy the fabric, so that was okay. She spoke to her supervisor. "Go ahead, bring in your friend." The friend came in. "Yes, yes we'll hire you." They hired anybody that had two arms and two legs and two eyes. That was good enough.

INTERVIEWER: If you were willing to work for thirty dollars a week.

TURNER: There weren't a lot of choices but there were a lot of people working for thirty dollars a week. But I looked pretty healthy, and I was a young woman. I guess they thought they would get a lot of good work out of me for thirty dollars.

INTERVIEWER: Was your husband pleased about this? Did he mind?

TURNER: Well, he didn't get too upset about it because it was a temporary situation. Plus we'd have some extra bucks. I went there in 1956. And that short time turned out to be five and a half years. I started out intending only to stay one month.

INTERVIEWER: What changed at the end of the first month?

TURNER: Would you believe that at the end of the first month the money was good? I mean, you know, it wasn't a lot of money, but to have the extra money was good. And so I stayed a little bit longer. But then other things sort of changed my mind. The idea of things that just shouldn't happen, even if we were being paid three hundred dollars a week.

INTERVIEWER: What was the job that you had?

TURNER: I was a dietary clerk. That meant that I would tally the menus. Patients would fill out the menus and they would be collected and then I'd tally them. So the kitchen could prepare the food based on what was ordered. This was done each day in advance. I began to understand then about diets and things like that. I began to learn a little about the hospital, not a great deal. The interworkings of the hospital were never discussed with workers. We were there more as tolerances than anything else. But some of the things that I saw bothered me no end. I couldn't shake them. It wasn't like I could go home and forget about them.

INTERVIEWER: What kind of things were these?

TURNER: One woman who was very sick--she was hemorrhaging--she was told if she went home she was not to come back. I couldn't understand that. This is <u>in</u> a hospital. And she was told by a woman. Our supervisor was a woman. This was a worker, not a patient, and she was a very young woman. I'd say she was something like 22 or 23 at the time. I couldn' deal with that. In a hospital--anywhere--but certainly in a hospital where people get sick and what we do is take care of the sick; that's what it's all about. Yes, the woman ended up passing out. So she was sick, no question she was. I used to watch people get paid less than thirty dollars, and the pretext, if you caught them, it was just a mistake. But it happened all the time. And if you dared mention it, people--those who had to do with the payroll--would show their displeasure. If you dared to ask questions they said things like, "What are you asking questions about this? It's only a nickel; it's only a dime; it's only fifty cents." I remember

TURNER: asking, "When can we get a raise?" I remember that. I was told that there is no money. "We'd be glad to give you a raise but this is a voluntary hospital. And we don't have the money." We were supposed to be volunteers, I guess. I think that was one of the things that annoyed me greatly. They had a dining room in the kitchen. But guess what? Only the men could eat in it. The women couldn't. And women got fired for eating a piece of bread. The male workers could eat, and the women couldn't.

INTERVIEWER: Why would they do that?

TURNER: To this very day, I couldn't answer you that question. When we asked they said that we made more money than the men. Now we all got the same pay. But they said the men were entitled to more money and they gave them food instead. That was how they justified it. We had a walk-out one time before the union, before we knew anything about the union. All of us in the kitchen decided to leave. We left and went to my house. I remember.

INTERVIEWER: Why did you walk out?

TURNER: Because we couldn't get a raise and we couldn't get the food. And we walked out scared to death because we didn't know if we would have our jobs when we came back. But they weren't smart enough to fire us at that point. They let us come back. By the way, most of the people were good workers and I guess maybe that's why, because when they fire you, they pull your card from the rack, so the next morning we marched in there. We didn't win our point, but we marched back. We got back and our cards were still in the rack! That meant you weren't fired. And we went back to work. But that was our first organized activity. That was just the women in the kitchen. I guess that in some senses set the stage for what was to happen. Because we had a real closeness. I guess misery loves company, and we huddled together over many issues. Some we wouldn't talk to anybody but ourselves about. We had a meeting with an administrator in the hospital. He told us he didn't have enough money to run the hospital and give us anything. And while he understood, and he was sympathetic [he would say] "We all have to do the best we can because the hospital needs us, and we can't afford to do any better." We went through that time and time again. And we did get a raise; it was fifty cents a week. It didn't do much. I remember my pay used to be $29.71 after taxes. My gross was thirty dollars a week. Even the government couldn't get much out of that.

INTERVIEWER: So you began to feel differently about that thirty dollars?

TURNER: Yes, I began to see that as exploitation. I mean, we could see things. This woman who was a supervisor, one of the things she did was to this young woman who lost her money. On pay-day somebody picked her pocket. She had three children. She came in and asked the supervisor to loan her ten bucks to buy

TURNER: milk for the children, because she'd just lost all her money. The woman said, "Why do you have to borrow money from me? Don't you save anything? Don't you prepare for a rainy day?" Yeah! And the girl was crying because her children were hungry. And she had nothing. So the girl tells us this story when she comes out. The woman opened up this big fat wallet, you know, with tens and twenties in it, and peels off ten dollars and gives it to her with all kinds of admonishments. And the next week she took back her money before the girl got her pay. These are the kinds of things.... I used to figure out how much money people were entitled to. I would figure out the pay for everybody every week, who wanted me to. And invariably they'd be 32¢ short. When you weren't making but thirty dollars a week, 32¢ was a lot of money. And they would ask, "Why do you ask about a little something like this?" As if thirty dollars was a large sum. So this is what we used to do, I guess as a result of that. And the women upstairs, the women who came from the Scandinavian and other Slavic countries were so very exploited even more than some of us, and maybe it was because they could speak little or no English. They used to come in at seven o'clock in the morning and leave at seven at night, for their thirty bucks. The food that would come from the kitchen would go upstairs, and if the patients were too sick to eat it, they weren't allowed to eat it. And I was in charge of checking to be sure that they didn't eat it. I could not see throwing away food instead of giving it to people. If you cook a steak and you don't eat it, it's not very much good anymore. Why couldn't those women have it? I used to watch them throw away garbage pails of food that was left over in the kitchen, but the workers couldn't have any. And I felt that somewhere, somehow, we could translate this waste into dollars and cents for the workers and workers' children, because most of these workers had families, many of them. There was one fellow with seven children, and another one had six. Trying to raise them on that kind of money. Of course they were high paid--a few of them made as much as $38--they were doing good. We formed a very closeness because of our mutual problems. You know, as I look back at it, part of it was the best thing that could have happened. I'm talking about the fact that workers had some commonness of purpose, some understanding of each others' problems that helped us to deal with the problems to some extent.

INTERVIEWER: In spite of the fact that so many of them didn't speak English?

TURNER: That's right. And I can tell you it was a mixture in that kitchen, because, you see, they didn't hire, until a few years before I got there, any blacks in the hospital. Or Puerto Ricans. But they'd begun to hire them. But the relationship wasn't a black-Puerto Rican relationship, it was a black-white-Puerto Rican--white from all ethnic backgrounds--it was just a mixture. That was the relationship in that kitchen, which was a large part of the hospital. Then it transcended the kitchen and went to the women on the floors, the Scandinavians. And as you were able to talk to people and interest them, it took on a multi-

TURNER: racial character and flavor. I just tell you that they couldn't understand how we got so organized with those women not speaking English. You know, I didn't quite understand it either, until one of the women said to me--no, she was talking to someone else and they asked her, "Well, why did you get involved?" and she said, "Doris said. And if Doris said, it's right." She remembered I couldn't go down and snatch the food away. But I would try to help, and she remembered. I'd talk to them, any of them, about other little things we were doing. Then I couldn't tell them anything wrong. And they knew about unions--they weren't strangers to unions. But they didn't know.... I would just say "come"--I couldn't always explain--and "union" and that kind of thing. But because I was saying it is what made them receptive, is what she was saying. And maybe she's right, I don't know. Except that I do know that they responded quite well. And as I see some of them now--and they are retiring, and getting pensions, and stuff--it's such a good feeling.

INTERVIEWER: I remember seeing that when you were fired; there were demonstrations and a lot of support for you.

TURNER: Yes. I want to tell you that when the arbitrater ruled that I go back to work the fellows in the kitchen spread aprons all the way up--the kitchen is always in the basement--they spread their aprons from the front door all the way down to the boss' office. This was my red carpet. It was fantastic. One guy was taking pictures, and she said it's against the law to take pictures in hospitals, you know, just to keep him out, but he took them anyhow. That was their day. And see, she was a little nervous about what she did because here I was coming back after they had spread all the propoganda that I would never come back to the hospital. But I was coming back, so they'd lost control momentarily. They couldn't convince everybody. That--when I came back--was after a long period, from February to August.

INTERVIEWER: From the time you went to work to make money for fabric, for those five years you were organizing the hospitals and figuring out that you felt like this, was it going to work and seeing what was happening that made you realize that something had to be done? Did your image of yourself change just by the fact that you were working and earning money, or by what you saw?

TURNER: I don't know. I think the feeling was latent and it came to the surface. You know, honestly, as I think about it, what made me decide to get involved were the things that I saw that I felt just shouldn't be. I felt I had a responsibility to do whatever I could. Now I didn't know what that was at that time, and my decisions were based on the circumstances or the situations as they arose from that moment on. They were not planned out, because I didn't know how to plan them out. I didn't know what to expect next. I just knew that this is what we do today. And tomorrow, when tomorrow comes, whatever it is we do, we do that. But I'd made up my mind that whatever it is that we had to do, to

TURNER: the extent that I could be involved in it, I wanted to be a part of it. Of course the union was an extension of that thought.

INTERVIEWER: How did you hook up with 1199?

TURNER: Everybody has their own version of how this whole thing started. But mine is that a guy--and I can't for the life of me remember who he is; it's terrible, but I really don't remember, but he was from 1199--came and he gave me a yellow sheet of paper, and by the way now, I'd already heard that the union was the thing for me. I knew my husband was in a union and what it had done and my friend said it was great, so when he said the union is here to organize, I said, "Here, this terrible thing; good. Here's a union. Let's go!" So he gave me a yellow sheet of paper and he said, "You think the workers in here are interested in joining a union?" I said, "Yes, I think so," because I told him we had our little walk-off. I told him we talked and I'd been talking to people, because my friend said the union is a good thing. And people were receptive. All we did was talk at that point; what do you do? Well nobody knew, but certainly people were receptive. It seems that a woman came down here, a woman named Ruth--can't even remember her last name--came down here and talked to someone from 1199. She knew somebody who knew somebody here, or something, and she talked, and then the union sent somebody up there. He asked if some of the people were interested and she said yes. She told him to see me, because she thought that I was the person, for whatever reason. And when he asked me, I said yes, I think so. So what we did was I took his yellow paper and I went around and in a few minutes I had over one hundred names. Well, that was certainly interesting. That was the beginning of the organizing drive. Everybody got excited and enthused. Not <u>everybody</u>, of course, that's not true, but a lot of people did.

INTERVIEWER: You say not everybody did. What were the attitudes of the people? Was it fear?

TURNER: Well, yes. Everybody would agree that we needed something more than what we had, with few exceptions, if any. What you do about it, a lot of people didn't know. They didn't know much about unions, didn't know whether to put your eggs in that basket or not; scared that unless there was an ironclad guarantee, this may not be the way to do it. So while this isn't much, maybe I'd better hang onto it, because I may lose it all. My attitude, and the attitude of all of us crazy folk, was, "We don't have anything, so we don't have anything to lose." And those were the people who rallied around, helped as best they could to convince others. It was successful, to a great measure, in convincing them. The difficulties: there were some language difficulties, there were some people who were frightened, there were some people who felt that the boss was their saviour and they didn't need to help or to get involved with it. So those we lost along the way. Or never had, were never able to convince.

INTERVIEWER: Was there a difference in the way the women and the men reacted to the union?

TURNER: Not really. The men were not up front. They were quietly behind the whole idea. But the women were vocal, more ready to take a chance. They weren't hiding at all. We had a few men like that.

INTERVIEWER: Did that surprise you?

TURNER: I can tell you that most people working in the hospital at that time were women, and still are, in this union that is, in the jobs we represented; there were certainly more women than men. But the women, almost all of them were outspoken and willing to take on a fight; and the men, while they agreed and supported it, didn't take a lead. They sort of went along with the tide, you know, that kind of thing. A few of them, however, were more vocal than others or more helpful, because we ate.... When we finally got a kitchen all our cooks were delighted to do the cooking for us. So they were very active in that sense, but that's not picket line activity. One guy would keep the place clean; that wasn't picket line activity. We had a couple of guys who used to stand around and read the Bible. We had others who did more standing on the corner. Some of them walked the picket line quietly, and some of them made noise on the picket line. But the women were really the.... I don't know why it was; maybe it was because it was they who walked off their jobs that time, not the men. And they had some of the same gripes, in terms of money, because that was what we were about. We just added the fact that we weren't getting any food to boot! Some of the women who were involved in that thing--somebody ought to write about them--they were really the unsung heroines of the things that happened at that place. They were really good. Some of the men were, in their own very quiet way, good. It was important to feed people, I'll never put that down. That was very important, because we didn't have.... Only men cooked. And to this day men cook in hospitals, I want you to know that. I've only seen one female cook in all the hospitals, and this was in a little place which only had about forty or fifty workers in it. Now there might be one or two that I missed. We had a small group at Lenox Hill; our strike there was small. About 125 people were out, of about 500. It was a minority strike for sure. The majority of the people weren't there.

INTERVIEWER: Were they crossing the picket line?

TURNER: Every day, all on top of us, as if we weren't there.

INTERVIEWER: Were these people who had signed cards for the union?

TURNER: Some of them. Others were those who didn't bother to get involved. But those of us who were there said we would fight the good fight. We were crazy; we didn't know what we were doing. Frankly,

TURNER: I think now about a minority strike and I shudder, but sometimes it's good to not know. Because if we had known we might not have acted as we did, which would have been a terrible thing and history could have been written quite differently. Unfortunately for us it would have been. But we put it together with just that handful of people and we made enough noise to attract attention. But we couldn't really make, by ourselves, any impact. But the fact that we called attention to this society, that people working in hospitals--"doing God's work" if you please--were making thirty bucks a week, with families. Many on welfare. Because those men with six and seven children were on welfare. Yet they worked a full week but couldn't support themselves and a family. So when people saw that, you know, it raised consciousness of a lot of things. And they joined with us and spoke out for us.

INTERVIEWER: What was the community support and press reaction to the strike?

TURNER: Well, there was one of outrage. You see a lot of people really didn't know that hospital workers were paid so little. So that was like a shock. So whatever was printed in the paper, people would just read. That is not to say that all of that by itself was enough, but at least it was there and people could see it. But I was too busy on the picket line to really understand all that people were doing in all corners. I knew that to keep our little group together was most important, because whatever noise we made added to the big noise. There were seven hospitals on strike around the city at that time.

INTERVIEWER: At the time you went out, did you realize that this was a big drive? Was that real clear to you, or were you more concerned with what was at your hospital?

TURNER: At the time of the strike I knew it was a big drive. Let me tell you, the night before the strike we had a meeting here, and they said Lenox Hill won't go because we were so.... And we were dealing with giants like Mount Sinai, so that if you have 1400 workers--1200, 1300, whatever it was at that time--if you have that number and you get 400 or 500 people, it's a lot different than if you're dealing with a place with 500 people and you get 100. So, I don't know the number of people Mount Sinai who went on strike eventually, but I do know they had a lot of support there from the workers, and there were other hospitals, you know. So they brought all of us together in a meeting that night. And we were discussing this thing and they said, "Well, we'll leave Lenox Hill till the next go around." "Oh my God!" I was just too uptight. "What? You can't leave us." You know, I'd worked feverishly to get us ready, as ready as I could, you know, because we had people who wouldn't join. I just cried, I was so crushed. Because in my mind I felt that if we didn't strike a blow for our freedom--economic, political--our freedom at that point, we would never make it. That was in my mind. We didn't go; everybody agreed that we wouldn't go then, but I can tell you the next

TURNER: morning I got a call: "Call Lenox Hill too, because we are going to try to keep up with the action." I couldn't understand; we were inside and they said come out. Confusion, confusion. You know people, what it's like to get them to walk off their job? So I called up the office and said, "We're not coming out until the end of the day, because if we go now we'll leave half of our people in here and we can't afford that. But when we go out, we'll stay out." So I went out and I told everybody what to do, running up and down the steps. The boss tried to keep me in the office. She even had nerve enough to say to me, "If you have to go to the ladies room, let me know." I said, "My children are big enough to go to the ladies room without letting me know, so I know you're not talking to me." Oh, we used to have it out, she and I. I don't know why they didn't fire me before they did. They fired me after the strike. Everybody agreed that after work we would go out and we wouldn't go back. And I think that might have been good for us. People would have got frightened because not everybody was bold enough to say to their boss, "I'm leaving." Once you're outside, to come in is different. So we went on with our strike. Many funny things happened. I remember the president of the hospital, who'd never said "Good morning" to me, called me in his office and said, "How are your children? How's your husband?" I said, "You know them?" He said, "No, but I know you have them." "Oh, really?" And so he wants to talk about that, so I said, "Well fine, but that's not what you called me for, I'm sure." "Well, I called to talk to you about people talking about a strike," and this and that and the other, and oh, that's terrible. "If we had the money you wouldn't have to go on strike, we'd give you the money. But to go on strike, well you still can't get it so it doesn't make sense." So they were putting up a brand new pavillion, a pretty pink building, that's what I refered to it as. I said to him, "If you can put up that pretty pink building, you ought to have some money for us." He says, "Well, we got special money. We raised funds, and funds, you know, are to pay for the building." I said, "Well, while you had your left hand out begging for money to build that building, you should have had your right hand out begging for money to pay us. Because if we don't get some money, we won't be here to work in that building when it gets finished." And so I talked like a typical worker, right? You know, talk about fund raising and hiring, and I'm ready to go! To heck with you and your nonsense! So we had a bit of an exchange there, and he was trying to convince me. And I said, "Listen, I don't know why you called me. I couldn't stop it if I wanted to." I couldn't. So he said, "Well, but you have an influence on the situation." I said, "I don't want to stop it." I said I couldn't stop it if I wanted to. "But I don't want to stop it." So he let me go. "Think about it, young lady. They say nice things about you down there." Well, they couldn't say anything else, because I gave them their money's worth. I always came to work. I was almost never out. Even with two small children. And I came on time. And I <u>did</u> the work. So there was nothing else they could say. But I also know, because that was another thing my grand-

TURNER: mother said, "Give full measure." Always give full measure. So for thirty dollars I gave them full measure plus, because if I agreed to work for thirty they were entitled to whatever it is I was supposed to do. My thinking was, "I'm going to do it, but I think I'm worth more, and so now, I'm fighting to get more. But you will get full measure." So he didn't convince anybody, and we went on. It's funny, as I look back on those things, these people, while they looked like giants then, they were mere men. Sometimes very small men. But once I met some big men--or big women for that matter--the folk who know about sharing and concerned with people rather than some ideas that have no depth, and really don't deal with people but deal with buildings and concrete and things that we can do without, at least without some of them. So I don't have any sympathies for those who got dethroned as a result of this, because many did.

INTERVIEWER: Because they lost the strike to the union?

TURNER: Well, they didn't really lose the strike, as much as attention was called to it but it was like the opening gun, and we gained friends. And as we gained friends, we gained strength; as we gained strength, we gained more friends.

INTERVIEWER: Who were the friends that you gained?

TURNER: Oh, they were people at that time like Norman Thomas. There were people--Malcolm X, Martin Luther King. There were a lot of ministers from Adam Clayton Powell who came up. Herman Osley from the Central Labor Council, all the unions in the city of New York came to aid us. They really supported us in grand style. Friends saw that we ate--a lot of baloney, but that's what was important.

INTERVIEWER: How did the strike go? How long were you out?

TURNER: Forty-six days.

INTERVIEWER: You could hold together that long?

TURNER: There were some cracks in the sides. The people who.... They were so great. See, it was an idea that inspired them. It was being tired that kept them.... And once they were there they realized that there was no turning back.

INTERVIEWER: Was this in people's minds who were on the picket line? Was this a strike for union recognition, or was it a strike . . .

TURNER: To change things. The way to change it was through the union, so you got to get the union recognized before you can change it.

INTERVIEWER: That means people were green, and many of them had never been in a union before?

TURNER: No. They felt that things should be changed. Long overdue, these changes. And they felt the union was the only way to change it, because they realized they couldn't change it by themselves. One by one they'd seen themselves get torn apart, destroyed. So they knew that it took something more than individuals speaking up. So when the idea of a union.... And it was explained that this is the way and they believed. And so they put their eggs in that basket. "And we'll do whatever we have to to get this union so that we can change things." That's how they saw it. In that order.

INTERVIEWER: Back to the picket line, and the men and women out there. You said that there were some that read the Bible. How important was religion in holding the thing together?

TURNER: It was very important to a great many people. Now black workers, many of them, and a lot of the Spanish speaking workers--many of our Spanish speaking members are devout Catholics. Our black members are Baptist. Religion plays a great deal. It's part of the heritage. They put God in front of whatever they do. So to read the Bible was not in any way strange, as they asked God to help them do what they were planning to do. So it played a very important role for a great many of them. A great story--it didn't happen in that strike, but it happened in another strike--about a lady who all she did was read the Bible and eat and smile and say a few nice things, but what she did most of the time was read the Bible, when she was not working. So on the picket line she did a lot of reading, and so we got arrested one time, a number of people, off the picket line. She was one of the people. And we were saying, "Oh, my God, oh, what's going to happen, oh my goodness." You know, worried about her. Here's a lady who had never been to jail in her life. She was about 59 years old. Maybe 60, maybe a little bit older. And going to jail? Oh my goodness. You know, we didn't know how she was going to take it. That's what we were concerned about. They came back and told us the story and said she was the star. When the judge called them before the bench, to ask them about what they were doing and that kind of thing, you know, because I don't think the judge took it too seriously. Nobody had done anything so terrible, just was one of those normal picket line arrests. When the judge was questioning them she looked up at the judge and she said, "Listen your Honor, I'm out here fighting for my rights, and I need some money to help take care of my family and myself. And I'm an old lady. I've been working all these years and I can't make no money and nobody has any respect for me, and so I had a chance to do something for myself and I'm doing it. I haven't hurt anybody, I don't intend to hurt anybody, and ain't nothing wrong with me doing it." She said, "No, you're up there looking down on me, but I want you to know there's somebody up there looking down on you." (laughs) They tell me the place was in an uproar. And I'm sure I don't repeat it quite the way she said it, but that part about "while you're looking down on me, there's someone looking down on you"--

TURNER: they said everybody could see the judge physically freeze. They all got out of there, I think. So there are many of our members who are very religious. Many of them now are very religious, and some of the older ones have retired who were part of that 1959 strike. One of our strongest delegates retired the other day and that was after a series of others. You have to have something to believe in, and that was their something.

INTERVIEWER: That's part of what I was asking, how in a hospital, where there's never been a hospital organized before, where not very many women were organized before, and people just don't think of themselves as being potential union people--what is it that keeps people determined that they can do it? I was in a hospital for a while which was organized by AFSCME, and I remember every union meeting would start off with, "We're doing this because God believes in it, and God's on our side," and I know that helped people through a lot of things that they probably wouldn't have stuck through. But then on the other hand, a lot of people used it to say, "This is the way things are and the way they're meant to be. Read the Bible and it tells you that you're not supposed to be out there."

TURNER: We didn't have any of that. We had the Bible to inspire us and God to protect us. The union meetings used to start with prayer; every union meeting used to start with a prayer, you see. Those who didn't believe--it wasn't God or anybody, wasn't God or man who could show them the way to go. They were just busy. Either the boss was giving them an extra two bucks or something and they'd sold out for that. But those who believed in the Bible and believed in the union didn't find any conflict. They felt that God didn't mean for some to have all and others to have none. I mean that was the translation. We talked about this. We still do. God helps those who help themselves, which was one of my grandmother's favorite sayings. When people would talk to me about the Bible and God, I'd tell them, "I know as much about it as you do. I know it says that God helps those who help themselves." I tell the story about the man who stood under the apple tree, hungry. "Oh, God, I'm so hungry. I wish you would show me where to get something to eat." And he's sitting under the apple tree full of apples. All of a sudden one of the apples falls down out of the tree and hits him on the head, and a voice says, "Just reach out!" So it's what I say, in answer to those who might say--but even to those who don't, "We have to, it's our responsibility if we want to change things.

INTERVIEWER: How did you go about organizing women? It sounds like there was no problem. Women didn't hold back because their husbands didn't approve, or because they were afraid that if they were the only supporter their children would be hurt too badly? Or because they couldn't be out at night and going to meetings? Did you have those problems?

TURNER: Well, yes, but they weren't insurmountable, as you can see. The women working there--we talked about this. We talked about the problem long before we did anything about organizing. There were many of them and we just wished we could do something about them, as people often do. And I guess in a way it was like dreaming. Our dream was about to come true in the sense that there was something we could decide to do about it, so we decided to do it. Now of course we talked amongst ourselves, because we had a locker room. There was a female locker room, so we were able to sit in that locker room and talk amongst ourselves. We visited after work and many of us became friends, and so we had our own little relationship. Some of the men were involved, because husbands got to meet some of the men, and we got to meet some of the wives, and so we had that. But not so much that it was a whole big thing. It was just a few of us, holding each other up. But the few who decided that this was the thing to do worked feverishly to convince other people. They did not know, they weren't able to determine what was going to happen in the end, but they didn't think about that. They just knew, if we were to change things, the union is the way. "And I'm going that way. And if I'm going that way, I need you to go with me, because you need to change things, and together we can do it."

INTERVIEWER: So it was the same talking to men as to women? Or was there a particular problem with convincing women that this was the time, regardless of what anyone was telling them?

TURNER: No. There was no problem in convincing them. Again, the women walked off first before there was any talk of union. They walked off the job. And I'm telling you, that's like taking your life in your hands. It was bad enough in 1959, but before the union involvement it was really where you had to be suicidal to do that. But we did it. I'm still here to talk about it. (laughs)

INTERVIEWER: All this sounds familiar. I'm thinking about the hospital where I worked; it was always the kitchen, the women in the kitchen, who weren't afraid to say anything and weren't afraid to get out in front of the hospital and say what they had to. It was more, I guess, the older women and women who had either worked in an office where there were few people around or had something that they were holding on to, something that they were afraid to lose. It could be the littlest nothing, or even a dream of something.

TURNER: They promised to put a brick in the building with your name on it. That's right. That's what convinces you to stay with the boss, if he promises to put a brick up with your name on it. Trying to shame them into coming with the rest of us, because all of us would be better off. We realized that unless we could get a group, a nucleus, a big nucleus, hopefully a majority, we weren't going to succeed. We knew that.

INTERVIEWER: How did you feel those 46 days, and how did you hold on?

TURNER: Awful, awful. We knew that it might have been more people at home. I don't know if you can ever get the total figures. I'm talking about those people who were actually on the picket line. Active meant sometimes they were picketing, if not every day. I assume there was another group at home who didn't cross the picket line; that we'll never know the numbers of. But there were just a load of them who could have belonged to the union who crossed it, and others who would cross the picket line because they were management people and had no interest with us, they felt. There were, though, some nurses who were not part of this group who stayed out with us. So it worked both ways.

INTERVIEWER: Could they have joined, or formed their own . . .

TURNER: Not at that time, because this was not the unit we were organizing. The unit we were organizing was a loose unit at that time. It pretty much excluded LPN's and that group. But some of them felt that they should be a part and wanted to participate, and they didn't go to work. We were very worried because we didn't know if we could really help them and support them if they stayed out, while we appreciated the fact that they sympathized with us.

INTERVIEWER: How did your involvement change? You said your grandmother was scared for you. Did your husband give you support? Or your father?

TURNER: Well, my father, yes. My husband.... We were divorced shortly after that. I don't know, I think this had something to do with it. My involvement became greater and not lesser. I remember one Sunday, my daughter had a birthday. We used to always invite the kids in the building and have ice cream and cake when someone had a birthday. And I couldn't be home because I was on the picket line, and he was terribly upset because I couldn't take time even for my daughter, he said. And I thought she would grow up a whole person, even if I wasn't there for her birthday. I didn't think that would retard her growth one bit. And we didn't see eye to eye on that. That was just one incident. I don't want to blame that whole thing on my involvement with the union but I'm sure it played a role. But if it had been strong enough it could have survived, the marriage could have.

INTERVIEWER: Did you feel that you were choosing between what you had at home and the union?

TURNER: No. I felt I was doing what I had to do. I don't think I could have done anything differently and lived with myself. It's like any other responsibility I've had in my whole lifetime. I've had a number of responsibilities and I've always felt that whatever those responsibilities were, I was supposed to live up to them. This was just another responsibility. It

TURNER: wasn't my own choosing, and as I looked at what else I wasn't doing, my children didn't suffer.

INTERVIEWER: Were they excited? Were they scared?

TURNER: You know, I only found out after my daughter became an adult how she really felt, because I guess she was too young to really put it into words. You know, "Mommy, I miss you," and things like that when we'd come home. But she really explained in depth, and this was after I was divorced from my husband. She said she used to worry, because she only had one parent, and that was me. She said maybe one day I would go and I wouldn't come back, on picket lines and stuff like that. You see? But she never said that until she became an adult.

INTERVIEWER: Did you bring them, or did you feel this was an important thing for them to learn?

TURNER: Yes, they walked on the picket line with me many times. In fact on Mother's Day, we thought the best way to celebrate Mother's Day was for them to be on the picket line with me. And that's how we spent Mother's Day. They used to come to the union hall. People got to know them and they got to know people. One of the guys used to draw pictures for them; the bear going up the tree--a straight line and four dots--that's a bear going up the other side of the tree. And they thought that was the greatest thing. I remember those things because it was so much fun to them. They enjoyed it. They didn't feel deprived. Not one little bit. I ask them, now, and they say, "No, we thought we had everything. We thought we had more than anybody else." To them, they were doing all right. I know that we were poorer than poor. I know many times I had some difficult decisions to make and some struggles to find baby-sitters. I had that problem. And while it's true that what I was doing was stuff that I wanted to do, you also had to be concerned with what happened to those children. You just couldn't walk away and leave them. So as long as I could find a baby-sitter, which was usually a neighbor, I was all right. And most times I did. But every once in awhile I'd run into a problem with that, because I had such erratic hours. That was cause for concern from time to time, you see. But they thought it was all very exciting. (laughs)

INTERVIEWER: Do you have to deal with that now in organizing, after that first strike, women saying, "I can't come...."?

TURNER: Sure. And I recited my story to them. And I said, "Now I don't expect everybody's going to do what I did. It depends on how you feel about it. But I'm telling you that it is possible to do it and I am none the worse for it, and neither are my children." And we'd talk about it. We'd say, "Would your children be better off if they had a union that's strong, that could make it possible for them to go to college, so they don't have to

TURNER: scrub floors like you? Or would you be better off saying, 'I'm going to stay home with them,' and not?" And then there's the discussion of husbands. You know there were husbands who felt, "Gee, this is a terrible thing. My wife is going, and she's not home to cook supper, and the food doesn't come off the stove the minute I come in the door. God forbid I should have to heat something myself." So a lot of women went through that. I talked about that and I said, "Well, frankly, I can only tell you what I do. That is not to say you must do what I do. I can just tell you that I have always felt that my husband was not able to support me and I had to go to work. And I was entitled to protect that job as best I could and improve it. And the way to do that is through the union. And any working person ought to be involved in a union." So most of our delegates are women. They came out at night to the delegates meeting. Again, most of the workers in hospitals are women, so that would stand to reason. But I would say, proportionately even, they outnumber the men in terms of their activity in the union. They come out at night, which is something to be said for them, in this city, in this day. They come to the delegates' assemblies once a month and there are other meetings that bring them out. There are chapter meetings at the hospitals sometimes which aren't so late usually. When we have negotiations many meetings take place. But they live up to it, because they understand the union and they believe that this is <u>their</u> union; they built it, they want to keep it strong, and they have a role to play.

INTERVIEWER: In that first strike, when hospital workers were saying, "We can be unionized too, and we're going to stand up," was there a sense that this was really women's work, and they were doing something that hasn't been done, and we don't see other women doing it--unions to organize women? Was there a sense of this?

TURNER: No, I don't think so. We didn't think of ourselves as just women. We thought of ourselves, I think, as workers. There was no real talk about the women's movement in our circles. Just wasn't no talk about that. Again, it was a question of surviving, staying alive, and woman's work was just a bit removed from raising crops and raising children. Just a bit removed. But not enough so you could distinguish the difference.

INTERVIEWER: When it comes down to striking a hospital and walking off the job where there are patients concerned, so many of the women who worked in the hospital where I worked saw <u>their</u> work as really good work, as charity work, and it was like taking care of your family, except that you got paid for it. You were a nurse or a cook or whatever, and it was still--you weren't going out to work in a factory; it was still women's work. Besides it was charity, and to strike in those kinds of situations was really a blow against about three things at once. Did you get a lot of that?

TURNER: Well, not as much from the workers. You got it more from those who were trying to convince us that we were doing the wrong thing. People who were trying to convince us we were doing the wrong thing would use anything, including that, and did. Some of it effectively, because there were some people who fell for that. But I think the workers understood that they would give their most. I think of the workers who worked in hospitals, most particularly at that time, I think anybody working in a hospital has to be a special kind of person, nursing homes in particular. They have to be special people. But at that time even more so, because then, for all that, you got abused, and very little compensation. So you had to be really special to want to work. Now if you have that kind of concern that makes you want to work for a hospital, under those kinds of conditions, then you certainly don't want to strike. You don't want to do that. But I think where we found ourselves was--as I explained to that president who called me in to convince me that we didn't want to do that--our backs were against the wall and we had no place to go. I remember telling him, "You can take a mouse, a tiny little mouse, and if there's a big man in the room, big giant of a man, and that mouse can't go anyplace except through that man, he's going through that man. So when you take us, the mice of this world, if we don't have anyplace to go, like in this situation, all you giants are going to have to get out of the way, because we're going through." And that's exactly how it was. We had no place to go. We just didn't. We understood that all the propaganda--I mean those who understood it--again you know that wasn't everybody -- all the propaganda in the world wasn't going to change that. We knew that unless we changed it, unless we had a union, which was the thing to change it, the vehicle of change, things were going to be the same. And we just couldn't take that, you know. We'd had enough of that already.

INTERVIEWER: I guess I'm getting the picture of how you get from a community where people don't have much--and it doesn't look like you're going anywhere but people aren't particularly angry, or pointing at anyone, or trying to change things--to where you're out on strike and there are only 125 of you against 500. You're determined to stay out there even though the hospital doesn't have to recognize you. And they can say they don't have the money and all this kind of thing.

TURNER: That's true. You see, the fact of the matter is, lots of times people would try to make changes if they knew a way or had any idea of how you do that. That's what organizers--I'm not talking about just union organizers, but community organizers--and all those people are about. The best people are people from the community, from the group, I think, to meet in this organizing. But when those people, or those leaders.... Because when I look back, there were a lot of good people in our community who could have been very strong and effective organizers, but they didn't know where to lead anybody to. Subsequently they were idle as well as the others in terms of this kind of activity, community

TURNER: organizing, and that kind of stuff. We have people confined in a ghetto of any kind, where all they know is what exists in that ghetto. They're born there, they live there, and they die there. There is no concept except the public school, which goes yea far and no farther. So all they know is just that. And they don't know there is a better world. My example of that is if you have had pork chops all your life and you've never had a piece of steak, you don't know what steak is all about because you've never had it. So that's true. If you're in a community and you don't know that there is something else on the outside . . .

INTERVIEWER: Do you think that had something to do with why people, say at your hospital, decided--what made them see that there was something beyond thirty dollars a week?

TURNER: We talked about it, and we said, "Gee, we're not going anyplace here." Everybody knew that wasn't enough to live on and people had all kinds of family responsibilities and problems. They were on welfare and just couldn't make it. And we saw them throwing away food in the garbage, perfectly good food. We saw this woman with this fat pocketbook of money and she was doling it out to this woman and talking to her that way. We saw all kinds of injustices and all kinds of things, and we knew that if you just translated some of that.... As we talked about it, it didn't just come to everybody like--(laughs)--like a voice out of the darkness. It was talking about, "Yeah, what about so-and-so, so-and-so. Now if so-and-so, so-and-so...." As you talk about it, you could see. The only thing is what do you do about it? You knew what was wrong, you knew what needed to be changed, you didn't know how. The union was how. And so when you put those together, that made it.

INTERVIEWER: But it wasn't very clear at that time how the union was going to do it.

TURNER: That's right. No, that's right. Except those of us who believed that it could said, "Heck, let's try it, because we don't have anything on the other side if we don't. We'll be in the soup. We won't make it."

INTERVIEWER: Do you think things were simpler when you first started? What I want to ask is when you first started organizing, when you were fired from the hospital . . .

TURNER: Well, I was fired from the hospital, but I went back again because of arbitration, which I could talk a lot about. It was a jubilant time for a lot of folk. First of all it was a good victory for the union, for the workers. Certainly it was a great personal victory.

INTERVIEWER: When you got back in, was it your intention to stay?

TURNER: I don't know what I wanted to do. The union thought that it would be great to go back and then leave, because I had been asked to come work on this staff. So some of the period of the time that I was out of work, I'd spent helping to organize, full time. So I'd had that exposure, and somebody thought that I might help, I might be of some use in the union. So they decided this would be a thing for me to do. Well, I didn't know whether I could do it or not, but I'll tell you one thing, that was very exciting to me, the idea that if.... Now remember that I had done this because I believed that if we could organize we could help change things. So it meant that if a lot of other workers would organize, they could help change things. It meant that if all of us together were organizing, we could change things quicker and better for all of us.

INTERVIEWER: So you were ready to be an organizer?

TURNER: I was ready, but I wasn't sure whether I was going to come or not because I liked the idea, but you know how you have to have those second thoughts. And more than second thoughts; just really think it out and make a decision.

INTERVIEWER: What were your second thoughts about it?

TURNER: Whether I could be good at it. Whether I could succeed. Whether I could really make a contribution. I always hesitate. I just want to make some kind of.... At least have a fair chance of making a contribution. I wasn't sure about this thing. Because I might be in the way of somebody who really could, you know. And I didn't want to do that. I also knew it was important for me to be at Lenox Hill too, because it was natural for me to make a contribution there, inside, based on the past and the history of my involvement there. So it was a question of where--which one I would choose.

INTERVIEWER: But you decided to do it?

TURNER: Yes. I said, "I'll take a chance, and there will be more variety." People kept telling me it was the thing to do. I owed it to myself, I owed it to the union, I owed it to, you know.... And I thought, "Well, if you could really do it, if you really can, you ought to do it. So the only way you're going to know is if you try." So I tried it!

INTERVIEWER: Were there any other women organizers?

TURNER: At that time there was one woman that they borrowed. This one they borrowed from district 65, and there was another woman who was a nurse in Montefiore who had come out just about at strike time to help out. And those were the only two women around.

INTERVIEWER: Did you see that as being a difficulty? Being a female organizer?

TURNER: You know, I never thought about it? I never really did. Somehow I guess I've always had in the back of my mind that you either can do the job or you can't, and nothing else had to do with it. Just nothing else. I think I deliberately want to think that way. Because it blocks out.... I don't want to add to the negative thinking that goes into those that come out saying, "You can't do it because you're a woman, and you can't do it because you're old, you can't do it because you're black, you can't do it...." for all of these negative reasons. So my philosophy is, you either can or you can't, and those factors are not the predominant ones in whether you can do it or not.

INTERVIEWER: I guess there's a difference between saying everybody should think that way, and push themselves forward. But then on the other hand there are certain reasons that not every woman could be an organizer.

TURNER: Well, not every woman could be but it's not any more than everybody could be a dress maker, or everybody can cook well or everybody could be the president of General Motors, or everybody could be any one thing. You know there are a variety of things and some people fit better in one situation than in others. I don't know that it's necessarily--I doubt seriously whether being a woman, old, young, white, black, is a significant difference.

INTERVIEWER: Not that it would keep them from doing the job, but it would put up barriers in other people's minds?

TURNER: That's exactly what happens, I think more often than not, because if you had asked anybody at the time I became an organizer whether or not I could organize--not people here, who had the belief that I could, partially based on the little involvement that I had had--whether or not I would succeed and whether or not I would still be here and doing some of the things that I am doing, chances are you would have gotten a negative answer. And they would have been because I was a woman, mainly, or because I was black. I'm not sure which comes first. But certainly that combination would have been deadly, you know, for somebody thinking about it.

INTERVIEWER: What were some of the first things that struck you, or that you learned in the job of organizer? Were there any eye-openers about being a "union employee"?

TURNER: The thing that always seemed to be upfront in my mind was that it's important to organize workers in this union. Their collective strength will change their lives for the better. And whatever is necessary to do to the extent that I can be involved in that was all I could see. Not so much delineating, well, "I'm a union organizer," or "I make a lot of money," or "I make a little money." Because I sure didn't make a lot. I was no better off financially, but in fact worse off because I spent much more money. I found out that you have to have a lot of

TURNER: clothes pressed, because you have to make a good impression, and all that stupidness that ain't got nothing to do with nothing. And if you go outside and get your hair wet, and it starts to get stringy, or in my case curling up all over the place, and you have to go to the beauty parlor, that takes money. You eat all your meals outside, you spend a lot of money in car fare. It costs a lot of money and you certainly didn't get.... I didn't make but a few dollars more when I came to the union. The union didn't have any money, so they paid us very little. We used to laugh about how you had to pay to work for this union. (laughs) It was really eating into your income to pay for some of these things. And many times I was out late at night and I'd take a taxi. It wasn't a lot, but it was a lot more than the fifteen cents car fare that would have been.

INTERVIEWER: What were your impressions of the staff when you first came on? I'm sure in the organizing drives there were always challenges about, well, union organizers are always communist. Was there red baiting of the union?

TURNER: Yes, there certainly was.

INTERVIEWER: How did that affect Lenox Hill, first of all? Do you remember that issue?

TURNER: You know, the hospitals, all of them wanted to use that. It didn't come out as pronounced as they wanted to because the workers weren't listening to that kind of thing. There were other people who had a vested interest in the workers remaining unorganized, who also used it. But the workers being black and Puerto Rican, you know, they didn't know what they were talking about, first of all. I don't think they knew, I really don't. But what they saw was a solution to some of their problems. So the hell with whatever it is, whatever this theoretical thing you're talking about. Because that's all it was. Many of them--or some workers understood it, and either ignored it or didn't ignore it. Because not everybody joined, you know. But the majority of them either knew and didn't give a damn, or didn't understand, and as a result joined the union in spite of whatever red baiting went on.

INTERVIEWER: How did it strike you?

TURNER: You know what I always thought, I guess I always felt pretty much the same way, because it seemed to me that that was an issue that was like hitting below the belt. It was like you're putting something upfront that ain't got nothing to do with nothing. The issue is workers are being exploited, and this is their one opportunity to strike a blow for their freedom. And you're trying to put another stumbling block in their way, which is not really germane to the outcome of this thing. And people were making an issue of something that shouldn't have been an issue. First of all, the facts of the matter weren't

TURNER: there, the true facts. Secondly, it wouldn't play a role in whether these workers organized or not. The important fact was, here was a union that was a good union. At least I thought it was good. I didn't know enough about it to swear by it, but I thought it was a good union. Anybody who would take a chance on hospital workers when everybody else shunned them had to be good.

INTERVIEWER: I wanted to ask you your personal impression of the other organizers and union officers that you met.

TURNER: In this union I was very impressed. I think what impressed me was that they were willing to put their union on the line for us. The fact is our first strike busted the treasury of this union. These guys were up early in the morning until late at night, outside, if it was raining or whatever. Always had patience and a word to teach us or help us. Shared the last bean with us, the last baloney. You feel that people who do that are sincere people. And whatever the outcome is, you should certainly tie your tail to their kite, because if they didn't get there it wouldn't be their fault. They certainly were dedicated to that proposition and you ought to do no less for yourself. Be involved with them. So I had the best feeling. I just somehow felt that people like them.... Because, you know, I'd dealt mainly with hospital bosses. Their equivalent on the other side was hospital bosses. They were people I had no respect for, so they were the worst of the lot, for the most part. So what I found on this side, the union folk, it was like night and day, and I said, "Gee, isn't this wonderful. Such people really do exist." I was just happy to do my little bit. If they were willing to do all this to help hospital workers, I felt that I had to do what I could to help.

INTERVIEWER: Were you red baited when you went on to do other organizing? Was that an issue around you?

TURNER: It was a bit. But then it began to die down. They used to say, "You work for that union and Leon Davis is a communist." I just used to say, "I'm a hospital worker and I don't know nothing about no communism. All I know is that Leon Davis is the best thing that ever happened to hospital workers and that's what I'm interested in. So sell your stuff to someone else, because that's what's wrong with this country. You're either red, white or black, and that's the problem. It ought to be red, white and blue!" That's how I dealt with it. Although workers who I was talking to when this subject came up who heard the answer I guess already felt--I don't know if I convinced them--but they probably agreed with that philosophy.

INTERVIEWER: That they're interest was with the union?

TURNER: Yes, and they went right ahead.

INTERVIEWER: Were there other women who came out of that wave or organizing hospitals?

TURNER: Very few women became staff members until a lot of years later. They became delegates, shop stewards, many of those, because the majority of hospital workers are women. And the majority of delegates were women. So we had a lot of rank and file leaders a little before and during and after that time.

INTERVIEWER: How do vou account for the fact that you went on to become a union staff person?

TURNER: You know it wasn't very popular at that time for women to be union reps. This is a more recent thing. Then there were all the problems that people attached to it that weren't always significant, but they enjoyed a greater significance than they really should have. "Children have to be fed." And I am not now suggesting that children aren't important. But women work. Working for the union is work. It may take you longer. It may be in some respects more difficult, based on the responsibilities that you have. But it's work. And when you go to a hospital it's work. And you find a way. Because at first, you know women weren't supposed to leave home. They were supposed to stay home and take care of the home. And then finally we branched out to outside work and then to the union and to other kinds and other fields. So this, by the way, was no real barrier. It really shouldn't have been a barrier--because one might be a woman--but the psychological barrier was there before people examined it. I think I was the first woman with children to come on this staff. In fact, I know I was. At the time I came on the staff I had two children, they were eight and six. That was a trip. During the strike I remember I couldn't find people to baby-sit. I didn't call them baby-sitters; just people who were responsible to mind your children. It was a question of finding someone competent, of finding money to pay them, of leaving the children psychologically; you never really, really left them, except when I went to work, and then that was seven and a half hours and I was back again. Not like with the union, sometimes you did or did not have a day off. But I was able to hang in there.

INTERVIEWER: Did the union help you at all with that? Was there any recognition from the men who worked in the union?

TURNER: Well, there wasn't much they could do. I just sort of felt that if my pay was equal to the man working there.... And after awhile it became that.

INTERVIEWER: After awhile? Was that an issue for you to get the same pay that they were getting?

TURNER: Well, it wasn't an issue as much as all the people who came when I came were making less money than the people who were here before. They were men, mostly, who came with me who were making less. So it wasn't that it was a male-female thing as much as it was new folk versus old timers, although we were all doing pretty much the same work. And that was the issue. It got resolved though. But then initially we weren't getting much money. So they couldn't afford to take a lot of people, and they needed a lot of people. It just depends. You just wouldn't believe what the salaries are around here. But that's all right. This is not meant to be a criticism or a complaint. Because as a member of the council, I have to staff the wages. The president of the union sets the tone. He says our wages shouldn't be so far out of line that we can't understand the problems of our members, financially. And I think it's a great philosophy. So I subscribe to it and we are all guided by that. That means that we are talking about the labor movement, and most industries, most jobs that require as much of you pay much greater salaries. Having said that, we understand at the beginning that you can't afford a lot of money for a lot of people. But you have to have a lot of people in order to organize, because the whole thing was to organize and the union needed a lot of people. And if you have a few dollars you have to spread it kind of thinly. And we understood that; there was no problem. But then it came a time when we had to deal with that, because the facts changed a little bit. When organized workers become members and the union's treasury becomes a little bit larger, so there was a little bit more to pay people--not that they should just go into the treasury and divide it up. We had to sit down and talk about it amongst ourselves so that the union would do the right and proper thing and be responsible as leaders.

INTERVIEWER: When you were on your first job organizing, did you think of yourself as becoming a union officer or executive?

TURNER: Never. Because I thought.... There were only a couple of officers, six, whatever. That's all there was when I came here. So how am I going to be an officer? We've got officers already. And I assume they're going to be here forever. They're doing a good job, and why should they leave? They weren't old men. So they'd stay here, and that was alright. I didn't care about that. I just wanted to organize. I told you that's all I saw. Never thought about anything else. In fact, I resisted the job as area director. I resisted that job when it was first suggested that I take over the area.

INTERVIEWER: Why did you resist?

TURNER: Because I enjoyed organizing and that was the thing that I wanted to do, the thing that I came here to do, and I hadn't gone beyond that in my thinking. But as the union grew, there were different levels of responsibility necessary. So people, for whatever reason, were asked to assume various other responsibilities that people thought that they could. But my mind was on organizing. As I thought about it, frankly, it didn't mean that I couldn't continue some amount of organizing, but I could help with those people who would be organizing. I could help with those people who were organized. What happens once they get organized? You don't just organize workers and then leave them. You negotiate contracts, and see to it that the boss lives up to the contract. And a million other things you do. So I began to get into those areas, which were a little foreign to me, because I never worked in an institution where there was a contract. So I began to see that. Then one day I sat myself down, I think by the time I got to the second level of responsibility, after organizer, when I got this job. I was about to resist and I said, "You say you love the union, and you want to make a contribution. Then if that's the case, you must do whatever is necessary. Because it will do no good to organize if where you're needed is someplace else and that place is minus somebody. You still have not made a significant contribution." So I talked myself into it, pretty much. So whatever it is that I can help do I hope I do it.

INTERVIEWER: What you've said is that your ambition is to help people to organize and to stay organized. Have you seen any blocks in your efforts to do this inside of 1199 as an institution? For example, not being listened to because you are a woman, or because you were organizing unskilled hospital workers, as opposed to druggists who were skilled?

TURNER: As far as the druggists were concerned, there was absolutely no problem there. No stumbling blocks. There were no prohibitions. In fact, the most helpful folk when I came to this union were the drugstore people, members and the staff. Because they were the people who were here. And those were the people that I first sort

TURNER: of fell in love with as people. People really good and sincere and dedicated to working people. They were my first example of that. I often tell my members, every chance I get, who was here when I got here, and who made it possible for us to get here, and that they are our grandparents. The hospital division is, I guess, the parents. We go down the line, each one of us supporting the other, making a good, strong, union.

INTERVIEWER: So there was no resistance or resentment to.... Well, I guess they did need other people to be with them, since I know that the drug industry at that time was having a lot of problems. They didn't resist their union becoming an unskilled or majority women's union?

TURNER: Well frankly, it couldn't have happened without them. They didn't have to organize hospital workers. This was something they went into because they decided they wanted to. Thanks to the wisdom of their leader Leon Davis and the rest of them understanding it and agreeing to do this then. They knew full well what they were getting into, in terms of the responsibility, and in terms of who would come into the union. Because these were pharmacists for the most part; they were white and Jewish for the most part. And the workers who were coming in were female for the most part, and unskilled, Black and Puerto Rican. And so they knew full well what they were doing. But they felt it was the thing to do to their everlasting credit. They put at the disposal of these workers, who were at the bottom of the heap, everything they needed. And to put at their disposal everything they needed you've got to give them everything you've got because they need everything. So they did that. And as a result the relationship cemented itself. And ever since then we've walked side by side, sort of parallel, because there are certain things that the drug industry does that is separate and apart from what happens in the hospital. But we're all in 1199, equally--we hope. That's our desire.

INTERVIEWER: And in terms of you, individually, being a staff member, there was no resistance to taking orders from a woman, or letting a woman, or a Black woman....

TURNER: They definitely didn't have to because we had a different division: the hospital division. I was in the hospital division. We worked as equals rather than them being subordinate to me, or me to them, really. Now of course, I came in as an organizer, and there were people who had different levels of authority, above the one that I had. I had never faced any difficulty. I felt real good about being here. I felt that people would take time and teach me things that I didn't know and answer my questions--there were a lot of them. I felt good about it. That was not the problem. The people that I sort of supervised or had responsibility to were people who were not drug members.

INTERVIEWER: And amongst people in the hospital division, were there ever any problems?

TURNER: I raised hell,frankly, sometimes. I mean, you know, just doing the best job is not always enough. Sometimes I'd just have to tell people to get off my back. If there is something I am doing that I shouldn't be, or if my idea is not good, then explain to me why it isn't and I will accept that. But don't tell me no "just because". That's not good enough. Every once in a while you have to say that.

INTERVIEWER: Did you get that response from above as well as below you?

TURNER: Well, I don't know. I think that here we pretty much don't say "above" and "below"--I hope we don't. If you mean the people I am responsible to or have some greater responsibilities than?

INTERVIEWER: From the people you were organizing as well as the people you were working with.

TURNER: Very little with the people that I was organizing. Very little. Every once in a while somebody comes along, but it's always for some other thing. I only had one guy to tell me that. He didn't say it was being a woman, but you know that that was what it was because he said that he needed to talk to one of the fellows who could understand better.

INTERVIEWER: How did you deal with that?

TURNER: So I said, "Go right ahead, you're free to do it." The guy said, "I'm sorry, but you'll have to go back because I can't handle that." So he was right back. I knew that was what was coming, but I didn't want him to stay here so I sent him on. He got there and had to end up right back here. He was an unhappy soul, but he had no place else to go. And frankly, his problem was one where he didn't want to deal with the problem. He wanted to deal with something that was superficial, and I mean it didn't make any difference where he went. But that happens every once in a while. I didn't get upset about him.

INTERVIEWER: Back to the question of why some women do get to top leadership positions in unions. You were saying before that a lot of women felt that they couldn't take these positions because of children.

TURNER: And husbands, because it was unpopular and it was hard work, and all that combination of things.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think that is changing now?

TURNER: Yes, yes.

INTERVIEWER: Do you encourage women to get involved in union staff positions? Do you think it's a struggle for everyone along the line? What do you think the main obstacles are now?

TURNER: Yes. You know, it's kind of hard. You have to understand in my first strike, I was a very young woman. A lot of the men had been here and were older. They weren't necessarily in this union as much as they were in the trade union movement. Some of them came from other unions to help out in the 1959 strike and stayed over, because the drug people only had a few staff members and they needed those few to remain with the hospital workers. When I assumed some of these responsibilities greater than that of an organizer, every once in a while some sparks flew. You know, I'd hang in there. I was told that you earned the respect of people based on your performance. I wasn't too worried about that. I just wanted again to do a good job if I could whatever it was I was doing. And if I failed I would have to move over and let somebody else.... So I just made up my mind that if I was doing that kind of job, I would gain their respect, number one and number two, I would have the right to remain; and if I didn't, I wouldn't and that would be that.

INTERVIEWER: Did it work out that way?

TURNER: Well, here I am, for whatever that means. Of course it is hard. Sometimes even now there is a test. I can't tell you that, and it wouldn't be quite the truth if I said that all and everybody looked at me as if they were looking in the mirror and seeing themselves. Not everybody does. I think that's too much to ask of human beings in this day and age, in this country. We are dealing in a real world and we are part of that world. The fact that for the most part the people here are the most enlightened, the most, I guess, part of the best there is in this society.

INTERVIEWER: That's partly my attitude about unions too, but you still run up against the same attitudes here that you do everywhere else. Did you always keep that attitude despite the fact that there were men in the labor movement, or whites who were not going to give you the respect that you should have? Did you feel that you were fighting some of the same problems?

TURNER: Some of the same, but I thought it was better then, you see, because my feeling is if anything is being done for any reason other than honest merits, then its something for me to strike out at. So the fact that it was just a teeny little bit, didn't mean that it was any less deserving of my anger. So that's how I treated it. Of course you can't fight a perpetual war all the time about everything. I don't think it's really necessary. But I think it is necessary when you feel that if something is obvious enough to you, and you feel that it has an effect, and most of these things do, no matter how small, you have to deal with them as best you can.

INTERVIEWER: Besides doing the best job and feeling that you would earn respect, how else did you deal with this?

TURNER: The psychological obstacle isn't there anymore and that helps out a great deal with the other obstacles. Because I think that when people psychologically think that they can't do it, then they find reasons to substantiate that feeling.

INTERVIEWER: You think its more in the minds of the women, than in, say, the policy of the union?

TURNER: It certainly isn't the policy of the union. In fact, I can tell you that I do a lot of hiring around here. In fact, I do all the hiring for the hospital division. I think that there is nothing better than having women on the staff. That is not to say that men shouldn't be here. I certainly don't mean that. But I do mean that there should be as many women if not more women than men. Because the membership is that. If it could be more men when the membership is that, then it certainly can be as many women.

INTERVIEWER: Do you have a hard time finding women who are accepting responsibility?

TURNER: Yes and no. It's not so much accepting the responsibility as it is.... You see you've got to weed through and you don't find women coming forth as much as men, even in this day. Because this is not a 9 to 5 job. And not every woman wants to work around the clock. Not every woman can. Some have husbands who still believe that they shouldn't be involved. Some think that right now is not the time because "my children are still small." When they get older, they'll come. Then when you sift through all that--which is much better than it ever was--and you've still lost a number of women. Because the next level, now, is, "Can you? Can you fill the job?" Not every woman can. You end up with a small group to choose from.

INTERVIEWER: Do you find that you need to encourage or help or stand behind the women that come on staff more to keep them here?

TURNER: No, no. Usually by the time they get through that door and say yes, or even come to apply, that's half the job. Now the next is can they do the job, and let me explain the full ramifications of taking this job. By the time they leave here and they say yes, we're pretty much there. Sometimes we may fall out, but then they fall out with men too.

INTERVIEWER: How about on the other side now? Someone told me a story about you, that there is some hospital negotiator or administrator who had a picture of you on some picket line that says, "When is a wildcat not a wildcat?" This person had gone to talk to this man for some reason and he started talking about you and what a wonderful woman you were and what a great negotiatior and what a ball of fire you were. Do you find that you have different problems negotiating across the table with men? Or

INTERVIEWER: are they just as willing to accept you as a union spokesperson? Or is that to your advantage?

TURNER: I don't know. You know, I've tried to assess that, and it's most difficult. We negotiate with the League of Voluntary Hospitals. That takes in three fourths of all that we do. Fringes, that what is left, is usually done by other people. The only time when I get involved in that is when they get bogged down and I go in to see if I can help the situation out. Now that hasn't always been the case. Let me tell you about an experience I had one time that was funny as all get out. I was negotiating--I don't want to zero in on the place because I don't want to embarrass anybody--but I went to negotiate and heretofore it had always been men, one black and one white, but never a woman, and certainly not a black woman. So I went in. These were pretty substantial negotiations, and when I got to the room where we were going to meet, our members were there, and the other side hadn't come yet. So I sat down in a seat with our members. We were just chatting, talking about all kinds of crazy things, including some dress or some kind of material; we were talking about things in general. So the other side walked in. They came and they greeted the man, who they knew, and they chatted for a few minutes, and he said, "I want to introduce you to the chief negotiator for the union." Now of course they looked around trying to find the chief negotiator. I'm sitting there with the workers and there is no way they can tell us apart--no way. And so I stepped forward to acknowledge the introduction. (silence) (laughs) And I tell you it was hard to contain myself. You should have seen it. They were these men with these pinstripe suits--because this was many years ago, maybe ten years, maybe more--and these starched, stiff shirts, and these ties, and big stick pins and all the other stuff they wear, standing there. It was too much.

INTERVIEWER: That probably had them rattled the whole session.

TURNER: It did. So it's hard, because I think they don't accept or like the idea that I am a woman. But they have very little choice, because of this union and its feelings on the subject, and they know that it will support the officers of this union in carrying out their responsibilities. And the members of our union, who feel that when I come, I come to represent them and do the best possible job, and they support that, and if anybody dared to take any officer of this union and tried to make mincemeat of them, they would rise up in righteous indignation. So it doesn't make any difference which officer it is to them. I've been here for a few years, and so I'm not a stranger to the members of the union, in the sense that they have some idea about me. Even if they dislike what I do, they would save it for the back room and rake me over the coals. But I don't think they would ever, ever turn against me in front of another officer, for that matter. So it doesn't give the employee any

TURNER: place to go, whether he likes it or not. Now that is not to say they all feel that she's welcome, and we're glad to see her, because I'm sure some of them die a thousand deaths and some of them have tested me.

INTERVIEWER: What kind of testing?

TURNER: I'm trying to think of one situation. One night in negotiations we had no place to go, and this fellow was unhappy and decided that he would try me on for size, and called my bluff. I was not accustomed to running. There are times to compromise, but very few times. Sometimes you have to walk away. I never liked running away. And so he called my bluff. There was a another time; oh, it was too funny. It doesn't have anything to do with the fact that I was a woman; this was just challenging union authority. A fellow decided he would run me out of the hospital. Being a woman was helpful, too. I was in this one place trying to organize the hospital and this one said, "George, is that your new girlfriend?" and he was scared to death and said, "Yes", and I said, "George, I'd like to have the money so I can buy some groceries." So he said yes, because he thought that he might be fired if they knew who I really was. I, of course, went along with it because it gave me an opportunity to be there and talk. So it has its compensations. And there are some men who would rather talk to a woman, just like some women would rather talk to a man. So it goes both ways--most situations do. Frankly most people, though, are interested in the issue. It is what you bring to bear, what you present, what you propose, what feelings they get about the union, something about its history and its background. Those are the things that stand in good stead despite whether the person bringing it is male, female, black or white. It usually stands you in good stead. There are some, unfortunately, amongst us who look for other things; that's where we're held back. The very people who sometimes succumb to tnis stupidness are the people who suffer the most, because the boss will always gain by it; the workers lose.

INTERVIEWER: I know that plenty of times in the hospital where I worked I would be walking around passing out leaflets or talking to people or whatever, and plenty of the guys would be happy to talk to me until they found out it meant business, and then they were terribly disappointed.

TURNER: Yes, that's true, but I guess that's men all over. I don't get as disturbed by that as maybe I should, only because women will do the same thing. Many times the guys may organize on a different issue. I'm not sure that's the best way or the most successful way or often the way at all, but sometimes women think that they are going to get a chance to go out with this guy with a nice suit on, you know, go to a fancy restaurant, because they assume that if he's a union organizer he makes a lot of money and he's got a big car--and they sometimes do

TURNER: have. I think most women, or men, don't put that as the first and primary reason, but some do.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think that women organizers operate differently at all? Are their issues different, or the way they present issues, different from male organizers?

TURNER: Not so much. I think everybody presents the union in a different way, as individuals. Not differently, hopefully, from the basic fundamental policies, philosophies, or facts surrounding the union, but differently because individuals are just different. But I don't think it has to do with male-female as much as it has to do with individuals having individual style. Because there are certain things that are so much the same. It doesn't make any difference who presents them, if they understand the facts and they know how to present them.

INTERVIEWER: That's funny about women thinking if they organize they will get to go out to fancy dinners in a big car.

TURNER: Yes. Because that's the idea of the union movement, the bosses put out. I've seen leaflets that the bosses put out to workers who were trying to organize with this guy with the big cigar and the shady glasses on, standing by a big car, telling the workers, "Do you want this guy to represent you? Do you want your dues dollars going...." Sometimes they paint him really dark, so that means another scare. "Do you want this guy representing you?" One had a picture saying Doris Turner gave Angela Davis $200 million, down in south Jersey. But what really disarms them, you know, is when workers see people like me, not fancy dresses, I just look like a worker. I mean ain't no question about my looking like a worker. And so they have a hard time equating me with the guy with the cigar. And that's true for the women of the union in general.

INTERVIEWER: Have your ideas changed or has your philosophy changed or developed in any particular way since you first took that organizing job, or since you decided that the union was the thing?

TURNER: I guess I was naive enough to think that if all things were right and good and wonderful, that it would yield all things right, good and wonderful. Not really that basic, but that if you could convince people, get to them, that most people would understand it, most folks would acquiesce to something that didn't really take away from them.

INTERVIEWER: Are you changed in that idea now?

TURNER: Yes. If you don't have a big stick, with most folks, you're in trouble. I'm talking now about bosses. If the workers are not prepared to struggle, they're not going to get very much. Nobody gives you nothing. Now I didn't think of this so much as giving

TURNER: as doing what was called to your attention--"If you could justify that" is what the boss would say.

INTERVIEWER: Even after those three years in Lenox Hill you were thinking that?

TURNER: Yes. I thought maybe they really didn't understand our problems. Maybe they really didn't know. Even Lenox Hill, where I began to believe that they did know, and didn't give a damn, I didn't think that that was widespread. Others will be better, got to be, and eventually they'll come around. I just sort of thought that the world was full of a lot of people, but most of them were understanding and good and decent; that's what I wanted to believe, that was important to me to believe. Finally you can't deal with it that way. You've got to come with the big stick with bosses.

INTERVIEWER: So has your style of organizing or what you tell people changed a lot since those first days?

TURNER: Well, yes and no. I put a greater emphasis on the fact that if you are not prepared to struggle, you won't get nothing. I used to say, "You have to organize"--whatever that meant--"and you come together and use your collective strength"--whatever that meant. I didn't put a lot of emphasis on that strength, because I thought that strength would be automatic if you came together, and the boss would see it and he would be automatic.

INTERVIEWER: Now you know all the tricks of the trade.

TURNER: I found that in certain situations, they do everything. This strike we have now is an example. Workers voted a majority for both the union and the strike. The workers asked no more than other workers around the city get. This place is not in the boondocks; it's right here in the city. It's in the Bronx. They do the same kind of work as the other members of our union. The home has the same reimbursement rate, and the money comes from the same place. There's just not justification for anything being different. Everything would lead you to believe that. Once these things were presented to this particular boss, in this day and age, he might resist. But he wouldn't take on a strike, wouldn't do that. But not true. Not true at all. Looks like we're going to have to beat him to the ground, somehow, through whatever means they can, in order to get an agreement.

INTERVIEWER: This is not something anyone was expecting? Or did you know it was going to be tough?

TURNER: It's the Catholic church, and if you want to believe that the church is....Listen to Pope Leo. If you want to believe that the church is a godly place that believes in the rights of people and in the rights of man and all that stuff, you wouldn't. But

TURNER: if you look at the number of Catholic institutions around the city that have no union, you might get a different answer. So it's kind of a toss-up but you have to prepare for the worst, because it just might be. And that's what we did.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think the workers were prepared for it?

TURNER: They knew. We made sure they knew what the possibilities were, the consequences of a strike, and what their endurance would have to be. But they're very aware. So much so that they all are there. We've lost only three in three weeks.

INTERVIEWER: You said that you thought by doing a good job and showing that you could do it, you gain the respect of people and keep moving. Do you think that that accounts for the fact that you are one of a very few Black women in top union leadership?

TURNER: I think that a lot of women, a lot of Blacks, a lot of minorities period, get passed by. I think because this society is basically a racist one. Some of that racism creeps in, I don't care where you are. It unfortunately affects people's thinking when they look at anybody that's different from them. Not everybody thinks that way or feels that way, but a lot of people do. And in the labor movement women are certainly a new commodity to deal with. And in the society they are a new commodity. Certainly Blacks as members weren't always welcome, and now that they are members and have to be. There's not much choice about that; some welcome them greater than others. Now the next hurdle is will you accept Blacks, will you accept women at the top? Some open their arms to this kind of thing and welcome it, some did it reluctantly, some are still contemplating it, and some ain't thought of it. So that's where we are. I don't know if that has anything to do with ability. I don't know if I have any abilities at all--I'd like to think I have a few. But I can tell you this: The hospital where I came from didn't think so. That's an example of how the whole thing is. But that's true of women and it's certainly true of Blacks--and to a very small degree it's true of others.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think the fact that you've gotten to where you have has to do with the leadership of this union, the structure, the membership?

TURNER: It has a great deal to do with the leadersip. Leon Davis, by the way, is a forthright man. I think he's always ahead of his time. He leads the union in that respect. He's always willing to change new ideas and to be the promoter of them, rather than the follower of them. So his leadership paves the way for even the most reluctant. I think that over the years even those who might have come and been reluctant find it hard to be. Not 100 percent. Not everybody. Some people didn't have any problems to begin with. Most people didn't. Some had a little problem, some got over it; and then there's some who are still having the problem. But I think that if I had to choose a union to work with--now that I

TURNER: know what I know--I'd still choose 1199. I really would. Because of several things. One is you see how important it is internally, because I have to be comfortable.

INTERVIEWER: Since you have the current strike situation at Francis Shriver Nursing Home on your mind, and the support demonstration by 1199 workers of two days ago on your mind, let's talk about that situation a little bit, and compare a strike of 1978 with Lenox Hill in 1959--how far workers, women, hospital unions have come in those nineteen years. To start out, what happened Saturday?

TURNER: Saturday a large number of our members from around the city went to join the Francis Shriver strikers on the picket line, to show their support and solidarity. We've tried to make it clear time and time again that our fight is not with the police. I took a sergeant on the side and said, "Could you tell the guys not to antagonize the pickets, not to pick fights with them? Because you don't have what we're looking for. If you could sign a contract, maybe you'd be the target of their anger. But you really can't, you don't have it, and we don't want to fight you." Despite that though, there was a policeman who we had asked to have moved from the picket line twice, and had been moved from the picket line twice, and was right back there again on Saturday. And sure enough, he provoked a picket by snatching something out of his hand, a little thing that he was clinking on to make sounds to the chanting, "1199 is here to stay" chant. One worker tried to push him away, push our picket away. He [the policeman] grabbed the one who was trying to push him away, said he was interfering. They banged him up a bit in the paddy wagon and things just got worse as time went on. So much so that an off-duty cop driving through the street like a crazy man knocked down another cop and one of our pickets. It's sad to see that kind of thing happen. We know that our struggle takes on a lot of forms, and we are prepared to struggle, however we have to struggle. But it's just sad to other workers in an attempt to suppress other workers who are fighting for a right and a decent cause--a legal fight, nothing illegal about it. You know, it just makes you wonder. What do people think --the people who were involved in this--or don't they think about how this really affects them as working people? And that's the saddest part. After you get to thinking about the guy with the broken arm, and the guy whose eye.... I don't know what state it's in. He's now at the ophthalmologist. They banged him up pretty well. He was lying on the ground and they were just kicking him. They put him in the paddy wagon and they beat him. I mean, the beatings are bad enough, but the thinking that goes behind this kind of thing, the fact that people can allow themselves to be hired out for that. There are some very sick people. It's very sad. And these are the people who are our guardians, the people who safeguard us. Our tax dollars pay their salaries.

INTERVIEWER: The issue of the police and police on the picket lines....When hospital workers were first being organized they weren't under state law, were they? So you had to be out on the picket line?

TURNER: The only way you could get recognition was by striking, many times. Even when the majority of the workers had signed up and indicated their willingness, the boss didn't consent to an election. And since the law didn't say he must--it didn't say he couldn't or shouldn't, but didn't say he must--they interpreted that to their advantage and said that it was against the law. That's what they usually said, and they would never recognize the union during those times. Almost never. There were a couple of places that did, but that was the minutest minority. However, the law was changed in 1963. And hospital workers--first under the Little Wagoner Act--were then able to organize and get recognition.

INTERVIEWER: Did that lessen the tension on the picket line, or lessen the tension between. . .

TURNER: Well you didn't have quite as many strikes during that period, you remember. You probably don't, but between 1963 and the big strike of 1959, during negotiations for recognition, we had not so many strikes after that. The next big strikes we had were contract negotiating and disputes in collective bargaining, rather than recognition strikes. It's a whole different operation altogether. Francis Shriver, by comparison, is now a place where workers have the right to be recognized and the Board has certified us. We are the collective bargaining agent for the workers. The contract now is the problem. So the strike is that kind of strike. There are things that she wants to put in the contract, like the right to subcontract away the jobs, that makes it prohibitive for the workers to accept any such contract.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think the workers at Francis Shriver are in a more defensive position than the strikes for recognition that used to happen, say, before 1963?

TURNER: I don't know, because, you know, what the workers see as the end that marks the beginning, is recognition and the contract. That's the end that marks the beginning. Anything in between that period is defensible, and there is no real difference, I don't think, in the way you have to defend it--the desire.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think that these workers are in a different position as to community support or, say, the attitude of the police or other workers?

TURNER: Well, I think there are some differences. First of all, in 1959 people just didn't believe the wages that hospital workers were paid. Now of course, needless to say, every worker in the city has been affected by the fact that our union has organized workers and raised rates and conditions. However, that's not the total

TURNER: sum of what workers look for. These workers felt that they were entitled to job security. If they're willing to go to work and to do the job, they shouldn't have to worry about the boss giving away their job when he got ready. And they are right. So the difference, in my opinion, is it's not so much money, because every boss has to raise the wages. It's got to be competitive. Can't get anybody to work for him. If he pays so much less than the 1199 rates, nobody will work for him. It's two reasons to give higher wages than he would ordinarily have. One is because nobody would work for him, and the second is it's a way to try to discourage the workers from joining the union. When the public hears--unless they listen closely and they are accustomed to listening to trade union matters--while the wages may be similar, they don't hear that part about job security, which means you get no wages if you don't have a job. And that's the thing that makes all the difference.

INTERVIEWER: I guess in hospitals, especially, there is a high turnover and it's easy to replace people.

TURNER: Hospitals that are unorganized, the places that are unorganized. I want you to know that where we've organized the workers, we've reduced the turnover so greatly. In fact, I don't know what it is now, but some years ago, five years ago, the turnover was reduced, oh, gosh, down to I guess about the barest. It was kind of a phenomenal thing; people were talking about it. Everybody was saying--you know these are people who are not proponents--were saying, "Oh, the union does some good." And that's what was important to them. It is true, because workers have not only some security, but they feel more responsible, more responsive to the job when they are going to be treated like human beings. It makes for a more stable work force. If you ask me if there is any utopia, the answer, obviously, is no. But there is a vast improvement that has accounted for this reduction in turnover.

INTERVIEWER: Are the nursing home people, where you are now, mostly women workers?

TURNER: Well, I guess most of them are women, about 75 percent, and about 25 percent are men.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think their jobs or their attitudes are any different at Shriver than they were at Lenox Hill or at any other hospital when they were first organized?

TURNER: Not really. You find that workers are pretty much the same, wherever you find them, in the sense that once they can identify and articulate their need and they can get some idea of what they can do to achieve that end and they make up their mind that this is what they are going to do, then from then on you're looking at the same worker wherever you go. The difference is workers who are in the union. The workers who were trying to come into the

TURNER: union in 1959 came in under a different set of circumstances. There was no background for them in this industry in this city for them to relate to. They were the first. So they were trailblazers in that sense. They had to go on raw nerve and anger and all other kinds of things, but not based on somebody else's experience or necessarily somebody else's guidelines.

INTERVIEWER: Sounds like maybe twenty years, and whatever social legislation and whatever advances for minorities or for women, haven't made as much difference as that difference between being organized or being unorganized meant.

TURNER: I think so, because it's difficult for workers, many times, to point out--especially the workers that we're organizing--to point out that things happen to them because they're male or female. It's very, very difficult for them to point out. But it is not difficult for them to point out that other workers have job security and they don't. It's easier for workers at Francis Shriver to equate their differences with other workers in our union. I guess the reason for that....I'm not sure I know the reason, but I think that it stands out. I don't think it makes a great deal of difference. We've only had two cases to my knowledge from the entire union with workers who were treated differently because of sex, discriminated against because of sex. I'm not saying there are no other incidences of this kind, but we just haven't....They're so nebulous or they don't exist, or we haven't been able to find them. The other thing that we pick up on was the discrimination because of race. It's easier. That has moved a great deal from what it used to be. Because you can pick up on that kind of quick. Look at any group of workers on any particular job, and you can see the different scales for the different jobs. They do more mixing. Now women are not as vocal either. I think that might be another reason. Our women are not as vocal maybe as women in other places and subsequently don't get involved in it. You see it's such a mixture. If you look at most of the jobs in a hospital, they either are integrated, from a sexual point of view, or like in maintenance, you know, the heavy plumbing and that kind of stuff, the women don't ask for the jobs. We had one girl I remember once who did, and she got the job. She proved she could do it and she got it. So they don't have that same kind of pressure for the most part. There are other kinds of pressures that female members of our union face. But they're most often outside the workplace.

INTERVIEWER: What kinds of pressures?

TURNER: Well, the same ones that women generally face. The feeling, I guess the way I see the pressure....That's not to say that hospitals are doing all the right things and that they don't discriminate against women. But like I said, there were only two cases where we had that kind of involvement, and one is now being

TURNER: resolved and one has been resolved a long, long time ago. It happened a long time ago and was resolved shortly after. No, I'm sorry, it was the other way around, it was men who felt that they were being discriminated against; the women worked less hours than the men did. I don't think there is a systematic discrimination in that sense. When you look for the jobs as administrator and those kinds of things--of course not as many women go to school and become doctors--at that level you find fewer women.

INTERVIEWER: Most of the women are bunched into your union?

TURNER That's right. And there are men and women doing the same job pretty much. Now the clerical jobs are almost exclusively female. Women want these jobs and they take them. Men don't want those jobs and they don't take them. I don't know that you would have any problem with a man getting a clerical job. I know of one instance where a woman wanted to be a maintenance worker in one of the building trades, in our union, and she was accepted. She demonstrated that she could do the job. It's very, very hard. One place, I remember, we had workers as waiters and there were no waitresses. We integrated that situation with almost no problem. Nobody thought about it one way or the other. But what happened, we saw it as discrimination because the waiters got tips. They could make more money, since the base wage was the same for everybody. So we integrated that whole thing rather easily. We have women security guards--not many of them want to be, just like the police force. You can find women, but I'm sure there are a lot of women who don't want to be police officers. It does not necessarily come from that they can't do it, rather than something that they don't want to do. I don't know that we have that kind of....Wherever we see it we try to deal with it, and we have been very successful. And it's been a minor matter. I think the biggest thing is can women break out and go into the jobs? These jobs, they pay the least, they have the most problems, but I don't think you're going to have....Where you have it is when you try to break out of that cocoon and get into the big money area, the big prestige jobs. All that other thing that you get when you get to be up there somewhere.

INTERVIEWER: When you get to be a threat to somebody.

TURNER: That's right. That's exactly it.

INTERVIEWER: Is that what you meant when you said that the pressures on women have much less to do with their jobs, the jobs that you represent in the hospital? You think that the pressure is in getting out of that job and into other areas?

TURNER: Yes.

INTERVIWER: Does 1199 try to do anything about that problem?

TURNER: Well, we don't represent the jobs. Our members can train for anything in the health care field through our training program. We train anybody, male and female, to any job they want to train for. Now the only doctor we've trained, the only administrator we've trained were both men. No females applied.

INTERVIEWER: You can go into the 1199 training program and come out a doctor?

TURNER: Anything in the health field. Now of course, when you say that, yes and no. Because training doctors is very expensive. It's a very expensive business to become a doctor. So you train one of those at a time.

INTERVIEWER: Does he then work in an 1199 clinic?

TURNER: He'll be in 1199 kinds of institutions, wherever he is. There is no difference in him now that he's been through that than he was when he started. I'm sure that's true, if you know Bill. His story is in the magazine [1199 News].

INTERVIEWER: That remark you made before--that the real challenge for a woman is getting out of the cocoon--do you think that relates at all to women's jobs within the union, here?

TURNER: Well, yes and no. Because unless you create it, you have to be very careful. If you create a job and you give it to a man, needless to say there's something awfully wrong with that.

But I think it's just as wrong to create a job which has no meaning for a woman. Or more wrong. And I wouldn't subscribe to that idea. And what do you do about people who are male, who've worked here for most of their adult lives; they built the union, they still make a contribution to the union--should they be thrown out to make room for women? I don't subscribe to that. So the question becomes wherever there is an opening, are you prepared to promote women as well as men? And I think the answer to that is yes. Because that so far has happened. I take this division as an example. The man who had my job before me was, of course, a man. The highest office in this division is held by a woman, which means that there are two of us. There are lots of other women on the next level, which are the organizers. There are a lot of women there. And a lot of women are delegates and lots of women are members. Now if you ask me if that's enough, no. But I don't subscribe to making phony jobs for people. I don't subscribe either to throwing people out who make a contribution, because they are men and they were here, and now we want to put women in. I think that would be wrong.

INTERVIEWER: It sounds like you are saying that things are changing.

TURNER: They are changing. And I think there is no way to change

TURNER: them anymore without doing something that's equally wrong. And I don't want that to happen.

INTERVIEWER: Would you have any special advice for women, not particularly in 1199, but in any other union who are coming in as, say, delegates or stewards, and looking towards going into the union? Any particular way they should, say through a women's caucus? Or do you think that is necessary?

TURNER: If women should have a women's caucus? Oh, I think yes, indeed, there ought to be some avenue of real expression for women in every union. Part of the difficulty in women moving anywhere, whether it's this union, another union, or outside in industry, wherever it is, is that things tend to remain the way they were. Nobody wants to disturb the status quo. Because it's comfortable that way, usually. And without anybody necessarily deliberately trying to keep women out, they just don't see the necessity of changing anything or for making any preparations for changing it in the future, or doing anything about change. And many times, if women don't say these things they get left out, they were left out yesterday, they are now left out, and there are no plans to include them tomorrow. So that next year, and ten years from now and twenty years from now. So it would seem to me that there ought to be some discussion on how we bring women forward in leadership in unions, as well as anyplace else, and concrete plans to be laid if no further than in the minds of those who guide the ship. And in discussion with women in the union, because I don't think other people ought to plan. I never like the idea of planning <u>for</u> anybody. I like, if there are plans to be made, the people that the plans are about ought to be a part of the planning. They ought to abdicate and the women ought to take over. I think there ought to be a co-mingling of leadership. Plans between the two, male and female, ought to be made for such co-mingling.

INTERVIEWER: Is there a women's caucus in 1199?

TURNER: In 1199 the highest body of the union is an integrated body. That's a separate and distinct women's caucus. But we have in addition to that the highest body of this union integrated with women. Of about 23 members of the executive council of the union I think there are five women. That's a far cry from a few years ago; there were no women. These are officers of the union, every one.

INTERVIEWER: How long have you been on that board?

TURNER: I've been on there a long time. I dare say I've been on there at least eight or ten years, which is not a new thing. The big cry for women's rights was not as prevalent at that time. One of the things that is so wonderful about the leadership of this union is they don't wait to get pushed into doing things.

TURNER: Leon Davis has great insight, and foresight. And he always is way ahead of the times, whatever they are. Through his leadership the union was ahead of the times that time.

INTERVIEWER: That makes a big difference from a lot of other unions.

TURNER: And you know, even with all that we know we're not perfect. I think we all do. But I think perfect is like beauty; it's in the eye of the beholder. I'm not sure I know what perfect is, but I know that the motives are pure; that is, I believe they are. I mean the motives of the leaders as a group. Individually people have all kinds of ideas I'm sure. But when we come together to make decisions I think we're pretty much together in the positive sense.

INTERVIEWER: Would you have any advice for a woman rank and filer, say at Francis Shriver when they finally do get their contract, about either the way she should move as a rank and file member into the delegate spot or trying to move out of the job?

TURNER: Well, what usually happens, especially in this division--I speak for this division because I have a great deal to say about what happens here--I look for rank and filers who are delegates to become staff members of the union. And as I look, I look particularly for women. And I think that is the reason that we have as many women as we do presently. Because a concentrated effort was being made to find them. And it is harder, you know, I can find ten men for every one woman, who wants to, who is qualified....Despite the fact that I have a lot of women, I would be remiss in my responsibility I think if I just took any woman who could not deal with the matters affecting our members. I don't think that would be proper. Just as I won't take any man. But I make a concentrated effort, which is more difficult. The women are more difficult to come by, so it takes more effort to look for women. Men, they come flocking here. If I show you the folder, people who send in resumes, to be organizers, for every one woman, I have ten to twelve men. If you take six women who come by, two, three, or four of them aren't qualified, okay? They want the job for some other reason, and so you have to knock out a great deal there. So you end up over a year finding maybe one qualified woman. And since there are so many men, you can find five qualified men. So in order to attract women and to get women on this staff, it takes a lot of diligent searching.

INTERVIEWER: When you say that, I keep thinking back about what you were saying about the picket line at Lenox Hill, where the women were out there and the men were cooking or cleaning up.

TURNER: Or reading the Bible. You know I said, "Listen, I don't have anything against you reading the Bible, if that's what you're trying to read, but frankly, friend, we need you on the picket

TURNER: line." It's true. Women were generally the aggressors in building this union. Except for the initial leadership of the union, they have been the real aggressors.

INTERVIEWER: But it's still hard to find women who will . . .

TURNER: You see it's one thing to do a limited role for the union . . .

INTERVIEWER: Then you can go home to your family.

TURNER: That's right. And its another thing to say, "Here I am for life." Committed to these crazy hours, this crazy job, going in and out of jail, getting hit over the head--because that happens too. My husband almost went to jail Saturday, trying to keep a woman from getting hit.

INTERVIEWER: I'm sure there are a lot of women whose husbands wouldn't be on a picket line.

TURNER: Any man I suppose would have done the same. The point that I made is that women are not necessarily going to be there, because if you are a member of the union you come when you want to and if you don't want to you don't come. If you are a staff member, you'll be there all the time. And it makes a difference. And that is what I think prevents some women. That's not to say that that's all that happens in this union, because you know we spend far less time on the picket line, if you take our total time, than you do with all the other things that we do. But some people, you know you magnify what you want to magnify. The late hours, which can sometimes be grueling for women with children. At least they feel that it is. There are husbands who feel that it is one thing if you want to work nine to five, but it's another thing if you want to work nine to nine. When you put it all together, it's not the easiest thing. Then there are women who feel that they just aren't able to do some of the things that we do here. They don't feel that they are up to the job and they won't take it. And there are some who really aren't up to the job. So when you get through sifting through, you're down to a few.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think that is changing?

TURNER: Well, the fact that we have now attracted.... I don't dare suggest that we couldn't find enough women to have a staff very well representative, because I think that women are very evident here, both here and in the guild division of our union. And that's very, very important. There's another woman who is head of a division here. We have four divisions; two are headed by men and two are headed by women. The first division of the union was a male, the second division was a woman--I mean the second in order of organization, when they were organized--the third one was male and the fourth one was female.

INTERVIEWER: The RN division was last?

TURNER: That's right. Saundra Clark. And then there are vice presidents of the union. So we sit on that council. Five of us sit on that council. It's really the first time. I was the only woman on that council for a long time. And then time brought four more. The most recent is Saundra. And of course when you look at the other levels, you'll see many more. It's healthy because sometimes people don't think while they are trying to make plans, and honestly doing it with good intent. They need the thinking of the people that you are doing it for. And that's what I meant when I said any plans that are made for people ought to include those people that you are planning for. And everybody thought that it was good to hear what women have to say. We have a baby-sitting thing at our meetings, at least the guild does. The hospital division doesn't do that too much. But the guild has a baby-sitting thing. That came from some of our women staff members who said, "Hey, wouldn't it be great to have a babysitter?" We have some teenagers, staff members' children. They come and they watch out for the little kids. And we have all kinds of junk for the kids and stuff. And the mothers can come to the meetings. That came from somebody thinking about it. And who better to think about that than women? Because most men don't carry kids around. Oh, we have one down there. He comes to meetings and he brings his kid to the meeting with him. And it's very good. It's healthy. It's good to see. I remember I was so impressed when we came from the Women's Conference last year (in Houston). When I got off the plane and I saw all these men greeting their wives, but what really got me afterwards, looking at them, saying "Wonderful, wonderful" were these men greeting their wives with babies in their arms. I thought that was fantastic. It was like the highlight of all that had happened in Houston. Because that's how I thought it ought to be. Because usually it's the wives greeting the husbands with the babies. This time it was the husbands greeting the wives with babies. I just thought that was fantastic. It was such a joyful reunion. That's what I wrote in a magazine when I came back, that one of the things that impressed me the most about that conference, besides the things that we did at the conference, it was significant that women could come together from all over the country, from all the states, in such harmony, and with such diligence. That was wonderful. But the other thing was seeing that. I don't know why, but it just thrilled me no end. I was really touched. See we don't have any children, but my husband would be that kind of man. I think it's a fantastic thing. Because we don't have any children, it never really entered my mind. We have bigger kids, but now that I am so very much aware of men and <u>their</u> roles, I sometimes think about what would my husband be doing at this point. And he would be carrying the baby.

INTERVIEWER: Speaking of that, one of the last questions that I wanted to ask you is, looking back on your nineteen, twenty year history here, if you had a daughter now who was eighteen or nineteen, would you encourage her to follow the kind of trail that you have followed through organizing and union staff jobs?

TURNER: No, I really wouldn't. I've never believed that parents ought to tell their children which way to go. I think that this was good for me. But then I am me. And there are lots of others like me, but they aren't necessarily daughters of mine. I always felt that my girls--I don't have any boys--should do exactly what they wanted to do. And they did. And they seem content with what they did. And I'm delighted that they are happy. Nobody thought of this as something they wanted to do. They were very much aware of what I did. In fact, on Saturday at the picket line, my daughter was there. So they are very much aware They've been on the picket line since they were little kids. They've been involved in various kinds of union things. In fact they volunteered at Logan to keep the gift shop open. Both of them gave a day a week for a few weeks to keep the gift shop open. So they know a great deal about what I am doing and what it is all about, but they never felt that this was what they wanted to do and I didn't either.

INTERVIEWER: If you were seventeen or eighteen again, would you follow the same path?

TURNER: And know what I do now? I guess I would, because I've always wanted to make a contribution. Now I might have found another way to make a contribution, I don't know. But if I couldn't find any other way I probably would have done the same thing. And the reason why I say it that way I guess is because some of the.... I don't know. I sometimes wonder if I did enough. You know what I mean? If I really did enough. I might have had some second thoughts about doing it if I had thought about it and could have seen down and said, "Well, Jesus, if I go that way I could do something, but maybe I wouldn't be doing enough; maybe I'd better leave this alone, maybe to someone who can do better." I might have done that. I might have.

INTERVIEWER: Do you think--that feeling of wanting to contribute somewhere--do you think there are limitations to what unions themselves can do? We did talk about the hospital (Logan) and that that's a little.... Maybe you should tell me if it's outside of the union's normal functioning. Have there been other organizations or movements which have competed for your attachment to unions? Are there limits to what people can expect out of unions?

TURNER: You know, first of all, I think one of the saddest things about the history of working people in this country is that while most of the people in this country are workers, or have been workers, the recognization of workers' contributions is almost nil. And it plays a role. If you go someplace and you represent General Motors or you represent IBM and all those other places, people are just awed and they think it's just wonderful. But if you go and you represent the union, it's a different kind of feeling, unless you're in a trade union setting. So that even the things a lot of times I think a union could do, they don't do. Then it's like the tail chasing itself. Unless we do, people will not recognize us as a force and a positive force in the community and the

TURNER: society. I think that the very reason it's good for my mind to be here at 1199 is because we do some unusual kinds of things. They are not trade union traditional things at all. There has been one union to do that kind of thing before. It's not a trade union thing. It really isn't.

INTERVIEWER: Is that co-op housing?

TURNER: Yes. It is, it's a co-op. It's a fantastic place. There are almost sixteen hundred families living there. There is underground parking, there is a place that isn't open yet for daycare. It isn't open yet because they haven't been able to find.... The city disappointed us. They were supposed to give us some money, so we've had a hard time with that. We have a gym with an almost olympic size swimming pool, a basketball court, a sauna. We have a dental and health center. We have the usual stores; a beauty parlor, liquor store, Sloane's, a grocery store, cardstore, a cleaners, and all that stuff. We have that and it's really a fantastic place. There are a lot more things we want to see happen there and I guess we will; we're working on them. That's one of the most exciting things. Somebody decided I should be the president of the housing corporation, the union housing corporation. It doesn't pay anything, but it's been very exciting. I've found out that trying to build a toilet in this city is enough to drive you wild. How we succeeded in getting that hole in the ground filled up and buildings up in the sky.... I wonder now how it happened. I'm not sure I know. We're very proud of it. It wears the name, "1199 Plaza", and it's significant to members and to people in this town of what workers can do, working within the union. We've been involved in so many things, I don't know how to even start. I and others like me have been to the schools talking to young people about their futures and what the labor movement is. Trying to give the most positive image, a true and positive image. The labor movement is a positive force. Without it, I don't know where working people would be able to get. I think our image could be improved. I think that has to do with the way we are received many times and the way we project ourselves. But I think there is no question, it's the most important movement in this country.

INTERVIEWER: What has been the most exciting thing and then the most disappointing thing or the most frustrating thing about your work with the union?

TURNER: Gee, I don't even know where to start, because every day there's plenty around here. We'll all say, "Gee whiz, yesterday was the worst day I've had. Oh gee, I said that the day before." And it gets to be.... And the same thing with the most exciting. I don't know what the most exciting.... I don't know. Growth is always exciting. 1973 we had the largest growth in this union since 1963. That was certainly exciting.

INTERVIEWER: Was that because of a major drive or any laws that changed?

TURNER: Well, the law did change in 1973. But mostly it happened because the workers were ready to organize. The St. Luke's and the Roosevelt's and the Presbyterians came in at that time. All of those came in, which was a big thing. It was really well received, because it was the greatest for organizing in the last ten years. We had organized as many workers, but it was done in a longer period. This was the largest group organized in a single time since 1963. That was very exciting. I don't know. 1199 Plaza was exciting, helping with the Logan Hospital is exciting. I don't know, there are so many exciting things. I'm the first woman I believe to be honored by the Central Labor Council to be trade unionist of the year. No, the second woman I think. That was in 1963. I went to the women's conference. That was exciting. We were involved in organizing in Charleston, South Carolina. That was exciting. I don't know how to say what was the most exciting thing. When the law changed to give hospital workers the right to be recognized in 1963 that was exciting. So many, many exciting things, and so many I'm sure I left out, because every day brings it's own brand of excitement.

INTERVIEWER: How about the most frustrating or the most disappointing?

TURNER: Frustrating.... There again it runs the gamut. I'm always disappointed when we organize workers and we fail. I'm disappointed because I know the difference between being organized and not. While a boss can sometimes buy workers away from their own right and the the thing that's really important to them, you know what it's going to do to them and you know how harmful, but they don't always see it until it's too late. Many times they'll come back and tell you, "We were silly, we should have, we didn't, gosh, gee," stuff. Those are some of the bitterest times and it's so hard because you know that the moment the workers vote against themselves, that sure enough they almost always live to regret it. And you stand helplessly by, not being able to do a thing. That's what's disappointing. Terribly, terribly disappointing. There are just so many things. I watch the boss hire scabs and the police to escort them. While my tax dollars are being paid to escort scabs across the picket line. I'm disappointed because there are not enough hours in the day and there are so many things to be done. That's a continuing disappointment. I never seem to get some of the things done. I'm sure that's true with a lot of us here. Vitally important things. You asked about a women's caucus. I don't know that by us not having it we don't get into the kinds of women's things that we ought to. I don't know that at all. We've a number of women around here who keep us involved in the women's things. There's no problem with that. But it would be good sometimes to just.... But you have no time. Even on Saturdays and Sundays. I worked Saturday and Sunday this week and last week. Many others do that. So you say, "Do it on Saturday and Sunday." I'd be glad to. So you feel that there is so much to do and you can't seem to get it done and it's kind of frustrating.

INTERVIEWER: Those are all sort of on-going frustrating things?

TURNER: On-going, yes. One particular thing.... I can't think of any one.

INTERVIEWER: Has there been a time when you thought it wasn't worth going on, or wasn't worth the struggle?

TURNER: No. I get angry when workers rights are trampled on. But that doesn't make me want to give up. It just makes me angrier and it spurs me on to try to make up for that disappointment. I remember when I was in the hospital trying to organize. You always have the counterproductive people who say, "Oh, that union" and other people who say, "Well, you know the union this and the union that. I don't know what I want to do." To those people I would say, "Listen, I feel that I am right." And if I can't convince them that I am right, they surely can't convince me. So with all those kinds of disappointments, I guess I'm kind of ornery. I felt that I just have to find a way. Because it's the only way. And there's no point in sitting there and crying about it. Or going off some place, because that isn't going to change a damn thing. You change it by standing up to it whatever it is, doing your best. Sometimes you fail and oftentimes you succeed. The only fight you're sure to lose is the one you never fight. That's so funny, I didn't know they were paying attention to me when I said that. That was about Logan, you know. I was talking to them and I didn't know they were paying attention. That was way back last November, last year. And we're still here. I'm glad we are.

INTERVIEWER: Is that 1199 as a union that is involved in that, or just something that you're doing?

TURNER: 1199 as a union. I have been dealing with fiscal contact, the contact person for the union. And personally involved. But it's the union's dough. It's the council's decision that we ought to be at my request. And it's the member's permission.

INTERVIEWER: How, besides putting up the money, will 1199 be involved? They won't be managing it?

TURNER: No. Heck no. We don't want to manage a hospital at all. We really aren't interested in that. We don't even manage 1199 Plaza. Our housing development does. We don't have any interest there. We would like to see the building as an institution; we think people can manage their own affairs, frankly, if they get a fair chance at it. And we just wanted to provide that opportunity for a fair chance. And we gave help and assistance in establishing the Plaza. Then came Logan. There are qualified people to run it, I am sure. We'd be happy to see them do their own thing.

INTERVIEWER: So 1199 will continue to provide money for it?

TURNER: Well, we're not really providing money. We put up one hundred thousand dollars in a letter of credit, which is the only way the IRS would consent to allowing the hospital to remain, because they were worried about the tax money that wasn't being paid. So while the hospital says, "Well, we'll pay you from now on," they'd been so remiss up to then that the IRS said, "Oh, we believe you." We worked out this crazy idea that the union put up this letter of credit, okay. So we put it up! And it's been there now since March or April, and it's as secure today as it was then.

INTERVIEWER: And how many people work there?

TURNER: I think 76. It was more, but they had no money, so they reduced the number. It wasn't very many, about thirty or forty. It was bad, there was no question about that. But if you have these kinds of choices, you have to look at the greater good. And that's what happened. Of course hopefully they'll have money to stay in business and bring them back. And they've only been gone less than six months. Those who didn't find jobs are on unemployment, which was the next best thing to working if you really can't. But hopefully they will be able to straighten it out and make it work.

INTERVIEWER: That is an unusual step for a union.

TURNER: It's an unusual situation. We are talking now about the only voluntary hospital in the state of New York, run by minority people. That's the only hospital in the country named after a Black physician. We're talking about the only voluntary hospital in Harlem. So it had the makings of something 1199 ought to be involved in. The thing that often gets missed, until it's too late and people say, "Tsk, tsk, what a shame." So before that happened we sort of got ourselves entangled in it. Our members were there; it was a natural for us. Can't say there wasn't some selfishness in it. We wanted to save our members' jobs. No question about it. We'd like to save jobs wherever they are. But we can't always be successful. It has been very exciting.

INTERVIEWER: After that, if the IRS agrees to forget about the six million, do you have plans for the next project?

TURNER: Let me tell you, something else will come up. I haven't planned a thing. I didn't plan this. But you can almost be sure that something else will come along. And that's what makes life worth living, something to do. Sometimes I could do with a little less! [laughs] But you can't always decide those matters. It's just whenever the opportunity presents itself, you have to be ready or miss the boat.

INTERVIEWER: I heard that you're going to Africa.

TURNER: Not this fall, but next year. We didn't plan to go this year. You see this was the yar that our contracts expired and I don't plan any big trips that year, because I never know what's going to happen. So I give up all of my plans. I don't make any plans.

DORIS TURNER INTERVIEW INDEX

DORIS TURNER CONTINUED