

**1 Sue Chase
Interviewed by Ann Froines, February 24, 2005
Local 888, SEIU, Boston, Massachusetts**

Tape 1, Side A

Tell me the story of how you first got acquainted with 925?

I worked for the City of Quincy at Quincy Hospital. We had been represented by a small independent union for a number of years, and I was a steward. Probably around June 1992 one of the unions that represented the housekeepers and kitchen workers at the hospital began to leave flyers around the hospital targeted at members of our group. Our group was a bargaining unit that included clerical, maintenance, and technical workers both at the hospital and throughout the city. It was a bargaining unit of about 280 members, somewhat evenly split between the hospital and the rest of the city.

Two or three of us went to speak to the gentleman who was the president of the small independent. It was pretty much a one-man show. Occasionally he had a second person working with him. He didn't keep people long because he truly was a one-man show. He really didn't release any of his power, let's put it that way. So we asked him to address the fact that these flyer were being left about. Although he promised to do that, in reality, he didn't address it.

In August 1992 I received a call from Nancy Cross who was at that time director of District 925 in the Boston area. I had met Nancy on a couple of occasions before that. She had worked for a short amount of time at the small independent union I spoke of. And I had been a representative of our group on an insurance advisory committee for the city. A couple of groups that were represented by 925 at the schools were also involved. When it came down to the negotiating piece—making changes to the health insurance—she became involved on behalf of her group. So I met her that way once again.

I agreed to meet with Nancy, and I brought a couple of other members from the hospital with me. They also had had some interaction with Nancy when she was working for the small independent. So it became a question of. . .well, the members on the city side were hugely unhappy with the small independent. Apparently they had been making some telephone calls and shopping around. For me it was not a matter of not supporting the union we were with. There was no possibility that the small independent would win an election, it wasn't possible, there was that little support at that point.

Ultimately I think there were about five different unions on the ballot, a couple of other SEIU locals as well as 925. We agreed to support 925. I think there were four bargaining units involved, the one that I was in that represented clerical, maintenance, and technical, the whole city. There was a maintenance and dietary unit at the hospital that was part of the election, and they split off those who were supervisory at both the hospital and on the city side. And all went with 925 with the exception of a small, supervisory group at the

hospital.:

What were the issues that made clerical workers at the hospital feel like they needed a union?

We had the union before, the small independent. I think it was formed in 1976, and we went with 925 in 1992. It was a result of people on the city side being very unhappy. (The 1991 election) was really a de-certification. The other groups, the maintenance and dietary people, had also been with the small independent. Through hearings at the Labor Board. . .I'm guessing it was management that wanted to split off the supervisory group. That was finally agreed to, to move the process along. Instead of two bargaining units, we ended up with four.

What were some of your own experiences as an office worker that led to your getting active in unions?

I guess I would say I was somewhat unconscious. . .as far as how we were treated? I probably had eight years at that time, ultimately I had 28 years in. I left there in 2002 to go to work for the union (SEIU). I worked at the hospital before I was married and had my children. I left and I came back. And during the five years I was gone, that's when they unionized, and went into the small independent. I worked in a small office, a data-processing office, and the supervisor was the head steward. And she may have held some other office as well, I don't recall. So I worked with the people who were the stewards and who were involved in union activity. It was expected that when there was a union meeting you went to those things. I certainly did; I guess that's how I was brought along, and perhaps started being more involved than another employee might be.

Is there an interesting story about how you went from being a steward to working for a union?

There's a lot that happened in between. The city went from being a public hospital to a private hospital in 1999. And I've always had the contention, that as an employee, sometimes you're on the "A" list, and sometimes you're on the "B" list. I traveled back and forth. The last 12 years I was there, I was under a particular manager, and I was clearly on the "B" list at the beginning. Then, for some unknown reason, I still don't why, I ended up on the "A" list. I could do no wrong for a bit of time. And then I was pretty much back on the "B" list by the time I left (laughs).

I had started out as a steward in 1987, and that happened because a friend of mine . . . I was working in a materials management office and it was outside the main building, across the street. And so I got a call one day from a friend of mine who had decided I should be a union steward. She was over in the building department, and I had worked in the building department. I actually worked about 11 different jobs when I was at the hospital. I agreed to be a steward. What I found out several years later is that they had apparently been pressuring her to become the steward. And her way of handling it was to get me to agree. It was the employees in her office who decided they need a steward, and

she should be it.

I don't know any better. I generally do what I think I'm supposed to do, so I . . . the first grievance, I had done the first step, and then the second step. I had a third step scheduled for that afternoon. I'm sitting there as the day is going on, saying, "This isn't right, I should be doing this." So I did call the union office and suggested it didn't seem quite right. Nancy, in fact, did come up and handle the third step; this was when we were still in the small independent.

So again, I was a steward, and when 925 came in I became very, very involved in the organizing campaign. An organizer who was hired for this campaign and I, we had people from various departments in the hospital who were also on the organizing committee. I was kind of the "go to" person, you know, was overseeing somewhat. So, that campaign started out in early October and the election was December 9. I'm fond of telling people that during the two-month period I lost 18 pounds. Not because I was dieting, but because of my involvement and being totally stressed out by what was going on. At certain points I would have lost what I ate. . .

The structure that we had for our union was an Executive Council, and I was a co-chair with someone from the city side. I was on the Executive Board for 925. I was a delegate to SEIU State Council, and part of the time was a trustee there.

We were with 925 until 2001. Then Local 925 in Boston merged with Local 285, a SEIU local. Since then—925 was mostly public service—what had been 925, then became 285, is not moved to Local 888, a newly created public service local in Boston.

Growing up had you an experience in your family with unions or union struggles?

Probably just watching "Norma Rae," all those movies. When my mother was rather elderly, I remember having a very brief conversation with her, talking about something I was involved with. She worked with the state, with the unemployment office, for years. And she commented that she had belonged to a union but she had never really been involved. She went and voted then they had a contract. And my father, yeah, I can think of a couple of places he worked that may or may not have... one was a small construction outfit, that probably didn't have a union.

Initially he was a heavy equipment operator, like a hoisting engineer. This was after World War II. Then he had neck problems, had surgery, then one winter he was laid off, and didn't go back. For a number of years he worked for Grossman's, delivering. At some point, he worked at the shipyard in Quincy. I'm thinking there would have been a union there. I never had any kind of discussions with him at all.

My mother was someone who was involved in neighborhood organizations. In that sense she was an activist.

Do you think that had anything to do with you being a person who spoke up?

I don't know. I probably don't look at myself that way. I was extremely shy, again, it goes back to always meeting my responsibilities, and if I perceive that this is what I am supposed to do in this situation, and I've taken responsibility, I will do it. Even though I would still insist that I'm very shy.

Could you describe a campaign you were involved in with 925, and some of the tactics?

An organizing campaign? The two things that would come mind: the campaign that brought District 925 into our workplace, and the other was when the hospital went private.

There were some fights to be had there. Some of it was the union's work and some of it was the employees with the unions. I've already discussed the organizing campaign when 925 was brought in. Again, there was an organizer that I actually worked very well with and there was an organizing committee with people from all the different areas and different departments. We had our assignments, we were grading people "1" to "5", a "1" being a vote for 925, a "5" being a "no"—and gradations in between. In a department with eight to ten employees, one person would be responsible for having a personal conversation with each of those people, and making a decision about whether they were going to vote for 925 or not.

During one part of the campaign we had a flyer, you know, "I'm voting for District 925," and we had people signing it. I remember being in the lobby one morning to stop people as they went by. I truly think that I spoke to every person in the hospital during that campaign. I had my own office at that time—my boss was on a different floor of the building. They fixed that afterwards, though. (Laughs.) It was probably payback, I suppose. As needed I would call all the captains we had assigned, in the different departments, down to my office. We'd have a little meeting and so I got away with a great deal during those two months. I won't say my boss wasn't aware necessarily, but he turned his head at the time. I was doing my job, but was doing a lot of other things that weren't my job. I had employees in and out of my office, and the organizer in and out. **Do you think of that as an important learning experience? You describe it as one full of anxiety.**

Oh, I enjoy it. There's no question that I enjoy it. And some of the weight loss might have been that I wasn't watching TV and eating potato chips. I had the list at night and I was doing work on those.

That's different from regular organizing. Regular organizing I'm not particularly interested in. Union organizing is not a job I want to do. Although, fairly recently we were all involved in an (organizing) campaign. And actually, I did very well. There were a number of cards we needed to get signed, and I had the second highest number of cards. So I can do it.

But it is not something I would want to do for a living. I don't particularly care for the organizing piece of this kind of work. It was different when it was in my own workplace. It was people that I knew, at least to some extent. As opposed to strangers. That's where I draw the difference.

In the course of working with 925 did you find they had a different approach to organizing than you were accustomed to?

I didn't really have any frame of reference for being involved with 925. I don't know. I know the organizer we had, her name was Marie Manus. She had worked with someone who was considered to be the be-all, end-all. There was a plan of attack that worked very well. Again I don't know how other places would have done it, but it certainly worked. The grading seems to be the way they do it now—in organizing.

Did you participate in any trainings to do that organizing campaign?

No, not really. It was with the organizer, and we had some union meetings and so forth where we would be given our marching orders, which was basically to go and talk to the other members. Later, probably in 1996, I actually went to a training that SEIU has, that was a number of years later.

In that campaign was your job ever at risk, or were you in the position of asking others to put their jobs at risk?

It was different from going into to a work site that wasn't organized already. Typically, we know that they hire outside law firms, threaten people, and do their best to dissuade people.

And we know people lose their jobs that way. That wasn't the case. Management . . . I'm thinking of the situation where there was a lot going on because there were five different unions. And the fight became between 925 and one of the other groups. There was some nastiness going on from the other group, who shall remain nameless. At one point, reports were coming back from the people that the other union had been asked to leave the hospital. What was being said was that 925 had put them out. Now how would this be possible? I remember I was in the lobby with the flyer I was getting signatures on, and I stopped the Human Resource Director, who, generally speaking, I would avoid at all costs. I wouldn't have sought those people out unnecessarily. I remember questioning her why that was being said. I guess I thought it had come from them.

Another interesting thing. I got a call one day from the mayor's office—I didn't know why they were calling me—telling me that the union organizer was parading around town hall and so forth, and that they shouldn't be there. Who are you talking about, I said? And they said, something like Mary Ann McManus. I don't know any Mary Ann McManus that's related to the union. I'll tell you what, I'll call the union office and tell them you've called. It was Marie Manus that they were turning into Mary Ann McManus but I didn't make the connection at all.

Were there grounds for saying the organizer couldn't be in City Hall?

I would assume that she was going from office to office talking to people, that's what she would have been doing. Somehow they had my name. . .

Anything more you want to add about 925 organizing in your workplace?

I trusted 925, and I didn't have any big problem with the previous independent union, personally. When I called and need to speak with the fellow who's the president—the "one-man show"—he returned my calls. Which may or may not have been the case with everybody. So I wasn't behind that de-cert or anything else. That was what went on, there was some kind of meeting with a lunch, but that was the totality of what went on (with the independent). With 925 clearly the goal was to have members involved. Every unit had a right to have a representative on the Executive Board. There were trainings and annual meetings; there were any number of things that would involve members. So it was a very different kind of union.

I mentioned that the small supervisory group was the one that didn't go with 925. The election was December 9 and one of the other groups contested the results, and things weren't finalized until about February 1. That other group never heard one word from their union until sometime in March. Four months went by, they never heard a word, and eventually had to call to make contact. So I think that there was with 925 a whole different level of involvement for those who were willing to be involved.

Do you think this difference had anything to do with the fact it was a women's union, with the goal of empowering women?

Tape 1, Side B

Probably. The goal was to have people involved, to empower them. I would agree with that, yeah.

In your workplace, there were men employees, too, right?

Not a huge number, most of my group was clerical. There were men in the group that was maintenance and dietary. And there were men in different units like housekeeping and maybe the kitchen. The kitchen workers and maintenance were the separate 925 group, so in maintenance there might have been 30 people, mostly men. There was another piece that Mass. Laborers had, the housekeepers, and the other kitchen workers. The piece we had were supervisory, clerical, and dietitians; on line people were with Mass. Laborers.

What was the role of men in 925 then?

I don't think the people in that group at the hospital could be judged to be representative, I would say. These are not people who would be involved. There was probably some

limited involvement. I can think of two guys who were stewards. They had been with the previous union and continued. But they weren't involved beyond the workplace as stewards. They wouldn't have come to any kind of function or to an E-board meeting, or an annual event. They weren't involved at that level. As far as the clerical group was concerned, there might have been a couple of people in the computer room. But other than that, I could probably say it was entirely female.

Looking back now, do you have anything more to say about 925 tactics and strategies?

I probably know more about my particular group and the period of time that I was involved. 925 began in the late 1970's, and this was 13, 14 years later. It is entirely possible that some of the crazier things happened before me. We picketed and did things like that.

We picketed at the hospital when we were trying to negotiate a contract, that was somewhat normal for us. I think that our group, because of the size of the group, we probably. . . when our group came in, we were probably the second biggest group for the Boston area. The only group to my knowledge that would have been bigger was the group called the guild which is the clerical, the school secretaries and so forth for the city of Boston. That would have been bigger but our group was 280 people; it was a sizeable unit to have brought in.

The kinds of things that I was exposed to as a steward at Quincy Hospital were different, apart from and beyond from what in the town unit would ever be exposed to. Around 1995 there was an attempt to affiliate with Boston Medical Center. As a result of that we spent a lot of time at City Council meetings, and we coalition-bargained for successorship language. Again, in late 1998 or 1999, it affiliated with Boston Medical Center. There was a big fight to get funding so that the hospital wouldn't be forced to close. We were put in the position as were all the unions at the hospital as having to come up with "x" amount of savings. We all had a dollar amount that represented 10 percent of labor costs for our unit. Despite the successorship agreement, I we had a round of negotiations to decide how to save the hospital and jobs. Working where I was probably exposed me to a lot of things that anyone in a smaller group would never have been involved in.

Did any issues about diversity come up in the course of your experiences with 925?

I don't remember. I know there were different caucuses whenever we went to conferences and things like that—an African-American caucus, a Lavender caucus. There were the different groups that had caucuses to talk about issues. I don't recall any issues coming up at Executive Board meetings, or any big problems.

What was the purpose of the caucuses?

I think the African-American caucus was for those are African-American to talk to one another, I would imagine, perhaps in general, and as it related to union issues, too. The

same with the lavender caucus for gays and lesbians. There were a number of caucuses. I went to a number of political conferences, I'm trying to think whether they had them locally or it was for people involved in the international group. It might have been more at conferences, at the level of the international (SEIU).

What were the political conferences in a union?

The international every other year, I think, had a political conference in Washington, D.C. For three or four days. I'm just remembering something, and I guess I'll tell you the story.

I think I went three different times with different people. It would be several days of seminars on different subjects, and then a day called the Lobbying Day. And they would have set up appointments with legislators and senators from whatever state you were from. Little contingents of people would go to try to talk to the Congresspeople about whatever topic.

Tape 2, Side A

We did lobbying, went to seminars. They filled your day from morning to night. They would have political speakers come in. The last one I went to, Hilary Clinton was there. When I was amused about before, it might have been the first one I went to with somebody from the city of Quincy, Kathy Nugent. We were both delegates to the SEIU State Council in Boston, so we were the ones who were sent to the political convention in Washington, D. C. We were at lunch in the big ballroom. I think the convention was ending on Tuesday. Kathy and I were staying an extra day, and we were going to go around D.C. and do some sightseeing. It was the beginning of the meal, and Debbie Schneider, the president of District 925 at the time, came over to our table. They were looking for people not leaving on Tuesday, because on Wednesday they needed, essentially, a token clerical worker to be involved in a press conference. And it was represented that all you had to do was read something. While she was talking to us, the waitress is starting to take my salad, and I'm really much more concerned about my salad than I was with what Debbie was saying. (Laughs.)

So I said, yeah, that's fine, I'll do it. In reality, it was not exactly as initially presented. My name was given to someone, perhaps in public relations, who worked for the international. What they wanted was for me to speak from the heart, they were not going to give me something to read, that wasn't it at all. You were supposed to come up with your own personal story of how corporate welfare is affecting us. I think they had a nurse from California and a student from George Washington University also speaking.

So it became very different. I said OK. I was working as a patient financial representative and regularly had elderly people come into my office who couldn't pay their bills. And I helped them fill out applications for financial assistance. Many of them were living on \$500 or \$600 a month, that sort of thing. So I felt that I could do it, but I was not someone who felt at all comfortable with public speaking. And this was not a

nothing for me, but I had said I would do it.

There was a reception on the roof of the Labor Department and Senator Kennedy made a speech and included the names of Kathy and I in his speech. The woman from the international spoke to me there.

The night before I started to get very, very bothered by it. Finally, I decided that if dramamine pills settled your stomach when you are flying, then dramamine would be a good thing to take. I started pumping myself with dramamine. I really didn't stop to read the box.

The next morning we were down in the big ballroom having breakfast. Hilary Clinton was going to be speaking. I was falling asleep in my cup of tea! I didn't realize that dramamine produces drowsiness, so I learned a lesson. I was literally falling asleep. I don't know, it was about noontime that we had to meet to march down the road to the capitol. It was on the east lawn of the capitol. They had all the congressmen assembled there. Bonier I remember, and James McDermott. One of them came over to me just before it started and said I was to put that in about corporate welfare, and I said OK. And I did exactly what I had planned. I spoke from the heart but I read it.

Until it was over I was sleepy. I am someone who when she gets nervous, gets physically ill. Let's put it that way. So I got through it. There was a reporter who came over who missed part of it, who wanted to know what I had said. I rambled off at her. There ended up a piece in the Ledger, the Quincy paper. A friend of my mother's who had been a correspondent for the Ledger, and elderly woman, said that the article was located in the most important part of the paper. She was very surprised by it all.

In your experience was 925 a family friendly organization?

Well, I didn't work for 925 itself, and my children were older, but I know at Executive board meetings people could bring their children. They didn't very often, of course. But there always was child care provided, if there was any kind of function going on. Those issues were addressed.

Do you think the aims of 925 were realized?

I probably don't have the same overview of what the goals were because I became involved later. In the sense, that, well, I've heard stories that they had great plans, and thought they would organize the big insurance companies. If you've heard those stories then perhaps they weren't able to have the effect that they hoped for. Perhaps they weren't able to build up their numbers. But they certainly did a very good job, and the people who were involved certainly appreciated it.

Anything else you wish to add to what is important about the legacy of 925 as an organization? Or what it meant in your life?

Well, I alluded to the fact that I considered myself very shy. I don't think it changed who I was but my working with 925, and becoming involved the way I did, brought out the skills and abilities that I had, that may not have been developed. It helped me grow—you know, I probably got a certain amount of on-the-job training when I was a steward, and it evolved that way. I stopped and figured it out; I was probably involved in nine sets of negotiations while I was still a member of 925. So I certainly learned a lot when I was on the job.

Initially when I went to work with Local 285 after 925 had merged, my territory was—I come from the south shore—the 925 units on the south shore. And I knew a lot of the leaders and so forth. So in making that jump, there was a certain comfort zone there considering the units I was going to have and the people I would be working with.

Was there anything that disappointed you working with 925? While an employee?

Technically, I didn't work for 925 because of the merge. First there was 285, then Local 888. Sometimes we were probably limited by resources, and ultimately that is why a decision was made to merge with different locals. As a district, they had three different areas of the country, and four different cities. There were limits. Boston was maybe 1800, or something like that, so . . . I don't know if it was a disappointment. It was limited in some ways because of the amount of staff. With unlimited resources you can obviously do a lot more than you might have been able to with those initial goals.

What are your thoughts about 925 as part of the women's movement?

By the time I was involved the focus was more on not offending the men, and being more inclusive. Yes, maybe 925 was 95 percent women but we had to be sure we weren't disenfranchising the 5 percent who were men.

Do you think 925 had an impact on organized labor, in general, or on SEIU in particular?

I think from what I know that District 925 was liked by the international, and I think that they weren't unwilling to change and move with the times. They were flexible in those ways, in ways maybe some of the other groups might not have been. Just the fact that the mergers happened is because they were looking to see how members could be better served, and what really would work. They weren't resistant to the changes that need to be made. I don't know if you could say that about all locals.

Anything to add? Looking back were you disappointed when District 925 disbanded?

Oh yes, I think people were disappointed. We had a retreat at a convent in Kentucky. I think that was August 1999. A lot of us wanted the name kept; if you are going to do that you should make them become 925! That kind of thing. Initially in Boston area there was a different small local that they were going to meld with. But there were

certain criteria: there would have to be a similar philosophy, they would have to involve members in the same way—these were some of the criteria that needed to be met. This other group was saying, yeah, yeah, but when push came to shove, when the question was called, they didn't really believe in the same things, and weren't really going to do the same things as far as representation, and so forth. That didn't happen. So we went someplace else, where they had more democracy as far as representation. And when we went in, 285 did make the changes to be inclusive of all the people who had been with 925.

I've very happy doing what I am doing now. I certainly wouldn't be doing what I'm doing now if I had n't become involved with 925 in the way that I did. I'm doing just exactly what I want to do, and will continue to do so.

What keeps you going as an organizer now?

When you say organizer. . .in some parts of the country, a field representative's job is called an organizer, and I always get confused. I wonder if we are talking about the same thing.

What keeps you going as a field representative then?

I don't let myself get stressed out. I'm a little more mature as far as having some years on me. And I do my work, and try to address people's issues, but I don't take them on myself.

They're not mine, and I don't take them home with me. I think that's because that's my state of mind, I'm fine, and perhaps I won't burn out the way some people do. I probably have another ten years or so, and I expect that I'll continue what I am doing.

I actually have 31 units at the moment. You are there as a resource for the bargaining unit. You field any number of telephone calls from bargaining units with problems. I am transitioning out of a big state unit which included probably 20 different state sites in addition to the other groups I had. You could get half a dozen calls a day, this problem, that problem. Depending on the group they might be able to file their own grievances. It depends on whether they have stewards in place and what training they've had. Sometimes you're doing it from the beginning. You negotiate their contracts. Ideally that might be every three years. I had 13 open this past year. I'm done with most of them. Because of the financial conditions in the last couple of years, some places I've done a one-year, a one-year, and a one-year. There is one of the bargaining units where I am going into my third one-year. Obviously you triple you work if you are doing one-year contracts instead of three-year contracts.

You could be doing disciplinary hearings, somebody has gotten themselves into trouble and put on paid or unpaid administrative leave, pending a hearing. My feeling is they generally don't have a disciplinary hearing unless they are pretty darn sure of themselves. So generally there is discipline or a discharge. Then we would be grieving those. If we

are not able to settle things, then we would file for arbitration. That kind of thing.

We have membership meetings, elect stewards, have ratifications of the contract once you finally settle. Those are the kinds of things. You have spells of time when you're gone a great deal from the office.

(NOT COMPLETE, THERE IS A FINAL STORY SHE TELLS OF HER MOVE FROM QUINCY HOSP TO WORKING FULL-TIME FOR THE UNION.)

Tape 2, Side A