

**Jacqueline Harris
Interviewed by Ann Froines
December 8, 2005
Shaker Heights, Ohio**

I'm interviewing Jacqueline Harris in her home in Shaker Heights, Ohio on December 8, 2005. Jackie, tell me first, the story about how you entered 925? What made you go to that first discussion or meeting?

(Laughing) I was employed at Cuyahoga Community College as a clerical person in the counseling office there, and a friend of mine, whom I met at the college, who had been there much longer than I had, brought Anne Hill to the campus one day. We had lunch together and I talked with Anne and they discussed some concerns, and what have you, and all. I really wasn't too concerned about my position and that sort of thing as I had recently moved to Cleveland from Chicago, and considered the college a temporary placement until I decided exactly what I wanted to do so I wasn't looking for any great things to happen there. But I went to a couple of meetings with Anne and with them and people shared their concerns and what have you, so I thought it was worth joining.

And what were some of the concerns of the clerical workers?

Oh the usual, lack of respect, no input in how things were to be accomplished, just about preferatism shown to many who knew the right people, the usual concerns.

And after those initial one on one meetings what was the next step of the union drive at your campus?

OK, the union was in the process of trying to organize the Cuyahoga Community College support staff and, of course, you have to get the votes, they needed the votes and that sort of thing, so that happened and then the union was eventually recognized by the college. I forget what the question was, excuse me, I'm sorry.

What was the next step? Were you on the organizing committee?

Yes, I was in one of those and it was a struggle but we persevered. It was interesting to me because I had no union affiliation prior to the 925 experience. Nobody in my family was ever involved in any union activities.

Do you remember some of the things you personally did on behalf of the union on that first organizing committee?

Not really, not specifically I should say.

Was it mainly going around...?

Yeah, talking to other employees and convincing them to sign cards and that sort of thing.

Did you feel comfortable doing that?

I didn't have a problem with it. As I said, my job was not something that I was seriously considering continuing in, so it didn't really bother me what the outcome might be. My kids were through school so I was only responsible for myself, newly divorced, so it didn't really bother me. I'm kind of fearless I guess. (laughing)

Had you worked as an office worker before?

I had. My husband was in the service, we moved frequently, and I usually had a position, an entry-level position, at just about every base and every city that we lived in because I've always liked being involved outside the home.

Did those experiences give you any idea that office workers needed respect and support of a union? Or you really hadn't thought about it.

I hadn't thought about it seriously. I know many of them did need respect. I'm kind of self-sufficient if respect is not given. I have a way of working it out. I've never been shy about speaking up and that sort of thing. But I did work with many people who were and who were fearful and that sort of thing.

Describe your background a little bit. You mentioned you grew up in a family that didn't have experiences with unions. What was your background?

I grew up in a small town here in Ohio, southwest Ohio, about I'd say at the time that we lived there maybe 20,000 people, probably 500 Black. My high school class consisted of myself and two other Black girls, that was it. We weren't included in too many things back in that day but it didn't bother us because we had our own associations. It was totally separate and that sort of thing. Let's see. I went to school at Central State and from there married and followed my husband all over the country and also Europe and Japan and that kind of thing and what have you. I had three children in the process and as I said, I always sort of worked in just about every location.

Were you active in any sort of community organization, church groups...?

Yes, Parent/Teacher Associations, church groups and that sort of thing, but as I say our stints were usually so short in a location that you never got in too deeply. My mother was always involved in things, so it just sort of came naturally.

What was military life like for you as a "military wife"?

Interesting, in that when we went in, my husband had a regular army commission, and it was just after the integration of the troops and of course most of your military high-ranking officers were from Southern military schools and that sort of thing and so this

was totally unheard of. It was at first very, I call it, "interesting." The commanding general ran his post as he saw fit and especially in foreign countries, they didn't adhere to (or) care what the government said about integration and that sort of thing. This was the way it was going to be. So we had some very interesting experiences. We were transferred many times because my husband demanded that he serve in the capacity that his rank required.. I remember one time when I went to Germany; we were sent a place to called Grafenbier, which was like four miles from the Russian border. Everybody else was going to Nuremburg and Frankfort and the other cities, and what have you, but we were totally isolated because he was Black and they didn't want him to command any troops or anything like that. So we spent a year up there until a new commanding general came in and then we were transferred down to Frankfort. It was actually a vacation, we got to do a lot of traveling. He had no assignment. All he did was sign in every day and then we did as we saw fit. I should have written a book about my army experiences, I'm telling you.

Well, it's not too late.

Oh, no, it's not too late, right. We had a pretty rough row to hoe.

They integrated the troops. Was the housing on the bases integrated?

Yes, when we were at Grafenbier there was no housing because it wasn't a post where families would normally go. We lived on the economy there which was beneficial 'cause we got to know a lot of the Germans and what have you and learn quite a bit, whereas when you're living on the base with other army people it's pretty stagnant, the same people, the same thing. But when we were transferred to a unit, the fourth division, yes, we did with the others and so forth. In my husband's class, the regular army's different than the reserves, and they have certain career paths that they have to follow and that sort of thing and there were about 300 and some officers in his group and they were always moved together. They all had the same assignment, the same training, at the same time and that sort of thing, so we got to become a tight knit group. In that group, there were seven Blacks, only two of whom were married. We got to know each other pretty well and what have you. We got used to going places and we socialized. We were integrated, this particular group was, but in our surroundings, it wasn't accepted so we closed down many a party because we danced together (laughing) and that kind of thing.

When would that have been?

Let's see, early '50s.

Well, it's not too late to set down some of those memories. Get one of your grandchildren to interview you if they are old enough.

I have two that are. In fact, one is upstairs.

I'm a great believer in capturing family history, especially when someone like yourself and your husband have done something that is not the usual. And really accomplished something like that.

Right, well, I was kind of accustomed to it because in school, like I said, in Troy, it was the same situation. We were the small group who was excluded so that had happened my whole life. I kind of knew how to deal with it.

How did you feel about the women's movement? Had that touched your life in any way?

Not really.

You were kind of like me. You were ahead of the cusp?

Yeah, right. I read about it, I heard people talk about it, but I was never involved in anything. I never really felt a real need to become a big part of that at that time.

So, after you got into the union through Cuyahoga Community College, what was your next role in the union after the organizing?

Well, what happened was that at the time that the union was trying to infiltrate... (laughing). I had a grievance in for reclassification as I was working at a very low grade. But I was doing the duties of a much higher grade. I was doing new student orientations...all that kind of stuff. At that time it was like whatever they realized you could do they would have you do. They would never upgrade you... that became your job. Job descriptions meant nothing. That was going on before the union came in through our little human resources process. So I took a leave and went to work with District 925 while we were organizing. And while I was on leave, in fact, I think I had about another month to go or whatever, I was reclassified. I got a seven-step increase. (Laughing) So, then I left the union and came back to the College.

So you were working then as an organizer?

I was working as a business rep.

As a business rep, I see.

Right.

So the union was already in place?

Well, no, we weren't in place. The vote hadn't happened yet or anything. We already had cards collected and that sort of thing, but it was after I came back that we finally were recognized.

What was your work as a business rep? Was it with other locals?

As a business rep, I serviced our campus and East Cleveland and handled grievances and that kind of thing. The role of the organizer and the business rep was kind of overlapping, which I guess it still is, to a certain extent.

Now they call it Administrative Organizer.

Yes, something like that. I went in as a business rep.

Do you remember any particularly exhilarating actions or struggles that you were involved in with 925?

Not really, once we had a foothold we didn't have a really hard time at Tri-C (Cuyahoga Community College). I guess they saw that it was inevitable so they kind of went along with it. I think the most interesting campaign I was involved in was in Chicago. 925 was trying to organize the clericals at Cook County. You know, with all the patronage and that sort of thing. That was quite a task so we did have quite a struggle there.

Did you go there?

I went there for a couple of months or something like that and worked. Then we brought other people from Tri-C in to try to convince some people and what have you.

Was that during the time you were working with the union?

Yes.

I'm from Chicago.

Oh, are you. I did, too, at one time. I lived in Chicago for about 11 years. We lived on the south side. And then my kids went to school in Chicago. In fact, my daughter just left Chicago; they're in Houston now. I love Chicago. It's a crazy place but I like it.

Yeah, it's a great city. What did you think was different or remarkable, if anything, about 925's approach to organizing?

I think. I don't know if it's so much their approach to organizing but I think the fact that 925 at that time was primarily interested in the office workers and so forth... I always thought of unions as dealing with maybe, steel, manufacturing, and that kind of thing. Since their focus was on the clericals, and so forth, I thought that was sort of unique and probably much needed.

Do you regard your experience with 925 as a learning experience?

Oh, yes, very much so.

Which leaders in the organization did you work most closely with in Cleveland?

Oh, probably Anne. I believe Debbie was here for quite a while. Who else was there? God, this is so long ago! (Both laughing)

Yeah, that's ok.

There were others. I'm not recalling the names right now.

Did you participate in any trainings and things like that in your time with 925?

We had training sessions for the units.

Were you ever on any of the executive boards? How did that work?

No. I wasn't. I think there was someone else from Tri-C who was. After I came back, my job didn't really permit me to spend as much time, you know, doing union things. I was never on any of the executive boards.

Did you know Carol Sims?

Oh, Carol took my job (laughing). I brought Carol in.

I thought she mentioned you in her interview.

Carol had worked at the college and had had some unfortunate experiences and she was a friend of my daughters. So, that's how I got to know her very well. She was somewhat unhappy at what was going on at the college so I said, "Well, you know, I'm going back, why don't you apply for my job." And she's still there. She was hesitant. She wasn't sure she wanted to do that.

Well, she's working for the union now.

I know. That's what I'm saying. And she's been there ever since. I know, if not more.

They've given her a new job now.

She told me. I'm happy for her.

So one of the things she and several other people have said is that they really felt their work was valued by 925 and that was in contrast to what they were experiencing in their workplace. Tell me a little bit about your new job at Tri-C. You worked with these same people, right?

I was a recruiter. I did high schools, businesses. We tried to encourage them to take classes at Tri-C. It was interesting. What I enjoyed most of all was working with the high school students who qualified to take college level courses, getting them enrolled and started...

While they were still in high school?

...while they were still in high school, I'm sorry, right. It was gratifying to see people who had never even thought about going to college see that a community college was really the answer to a lot of their problems. That was very gratifying.

How many years did you do that kind of work?

Twenty-nine. I just retired a year and half ago. Yeah, twenty-nine! I can't believe it. Time flies when you're having fun! I did enjoy what I did though. It made it much easier.

You were out of the office a lot?

Yes.

What's the racial/ethnic profile of the community college? Were there many African American employees?

At that time, we had three campuses. Now they have three campuses and three corporate colleges and they've grown tremendously. At the metropolitan campus, which is the urban campus downtown on 30th Street, probably maybe even 40/60 African American employees. There were many.

And also many African American students?

Oh, definitely. Probably 70% of the students were African American. At the eastern campus which came along maybe 10 years later there was a small African American enrollment at first but then that's escalated so they're about half and half now. Western Campus...you don't know Cleveland but it's far west, near the airport, and that's primarily lily-white territory. Then, many of the African American students are enrolled there because some of the programs are based there. And also, the staff and the faculty at western campus... it's changed quite a bit. You still have some African Americans who are hesitant to go to West Campus because it is West Campus.

What can you say about your own development as a leader in 925?

I don't know if I was really a leader in 925. (laughing)

Leader in the union drive, right?

Yeah, right. I don't know if there was so much development or not. I just sort of came in like you normally do. Like I said, I was never a shrinking violet, never hesitant about expressing my views and that sort of thing.

In the years you were working doing recruitment, were you active in the union as a member?

Yes. My position was a union position. In fact, that's interesting now because they're trying to change it. It's not been filled since I left because the college attempted to make it non-union and change the requirements. They went from a bachelor's to a master's and there was a lot more testing involved and that sort of thing. They didn't list it as a union position and therefore it was grieved. It was withdrawn. Recently, in fact, within the last two months, it's reappeared and it's listed as being a temporary position with no employment after the end of this fiscal year, which is June 30th. That's an attempt to keep any internal candidates, who are union, from applying for it because who's going to give up...

There are so few positions there that I was a ten, and most of the union personnel are under the grade of five. So this would really be a great advancement for them but I guess they're trying to curtail that for whatever reason. So, they listed it as such and I don't know what Carol and them are doing about that but I'm sure they're doing something.

Did you ever run for any office in the union?

I was president once.

What were your duties as president? You get some time off from work when you're president, don't you?

You get release time for some things. And gosh, what did we do. This was so long ago I almost forgot about that. Is Mike Laken (sp?) one of the people you're going to interview, by the way?

I don't recognize the name.

It's interesting because either I was president before him or he was president before me but I can't remember which, but he was instrumental, very much so, in fact, his name came to mind because he's retiring, I guess, in December and I have to call him. What did we...

Ran the meeting...?

Ran the meeting, yeah, right, the usual...

Did you do the collective bargaining, too?

No. Well, yes, I'm sorry, I was on the negotiating team always. Yes, we did do that.

How many terms were you president and how long?

I think just one.

Was it a couple years?

Yes, I think it's two years, I believe two or three, I'm not sure now.

Did you remember any things from that experience that were noteworthy? Did you feel comfortable being the president? Did you like it?

I guess. It was something that had to be done more than anything else. I think that most people were hesitant to run for that because they figured, oh, they're going to be out to get you, and, like I said, I didn't care one way or the other. I just, kind of, fell into it.

It's a lot of extra responsibility; nighttime meetings and things like that.

There were meetings and trainings and all of that, right.

And as president did you go to some of the national 925 conferences and things like that?

Yes.

What was your impression of 925 as a national organization?

I thought it was great. I hate to say it, I've since changed my mind since they are now a part of 1199 or whatever.

Oh, you can say it.

Oh, I am saying it! (Laughing) I was definitely... I was opposed to that. I told Anne I never felt comfortable with that when they were considering it. I think it was much better before, even though you wouldn't have all the resources and what have you that you would have becoming part of a huge...but I don't know. It's not my cup of tea. I would not be involved now if they were a part of 1199.

And can you say why that is?

I thought the interests were different to a certain extent. 1199, as I understand it, is a group of nurses or nurses aides and maybe chefs and health care workers and something, and although you're going to have some common interests, I thought because 925 was specifically office-oriented that it was much better for the employees. The way it was

going to be structured... I forget the guy,s name... I went to a meeting... He turned me off from the minute I stepped in the door and I knew right away...

Very different styles...?

Yes, right, that kind of thing I could never be involved in.

That's what some of the other people have said.

Oh, really?

Yes, that it's been hard...

I'm sure it has.

...the integration, the merger of 925, mainly in Cleveland has been hard.

What's your feeling on it?

Since the legacy of 925 is the next question, the final questions in the interview have to do with the legacy of 925. I don't want to put words in your mouth so I'll tell you a little bit about what I think about it after you say what you think the legacy of 925 is to the rest of the labor movement. What did it represent in the labor movement?

I thought it represented the women and improving their plight as workers and that sort of thing. It was really targeted to that and I don't think that was anything that had been done before, although as I said, I had no union experience prior to. But I didn't know of a union that was specifically for office workers who are primarily women. Although, we had several men, like I just mentioned Mike and that sort of thing, and I thought well, this is great thing because we have to get out there and work just like the men do and we certainly needed something that was geared to us. I think that was their legacy. But then, like I said, when they veered away from that I ...

Were you involved in the retreat they had to talk about the merging?

Not in a—

END of SIDE A
START of SIDE B

I've not been to any of the meetings or seminars after but I've heard quite a bit about them. I operate a lot on instinct and I wasn't getting the right vibes from that. And I certainly didn't vote for it.

Do you think 925 had an impact on SEIU?

Yes. Yes I do.

How would you describe that?

I thought it was good. I thought that with Sweeney, it was a good mix. I thought that he shared a lot of the views that were shared by Karen and the leaders of 925. I thought that they had a lot of common interest and so forth. I think that 925 complemented SEIU because that was a piece that they really needed.

What would you say the experience of working first as an organizer and then a union president meant in your life?

What did it mean? (Laughing) Oh, well, it was a part of it... not an integral part at all. I'm sure I learned... you learn from any experience, I think. I'm sure I learned quite a few things and what have you, but I don't know if it had a big impact at that stage. You have to realize that at the point that I went to work, I already had been a housewife for years. Only after my husband died was I, you know, kind of the head of the family and that sort of thing. And I didn't have to really struggle to survive.

You were financially stable?

Stable, yeah, stable and what have you. But, like I say, I always had an interest in working outside the home so that's why I continued to do so. At that time, I had to be 40 something, close to 50.

Do you feel optimistic about the future of the labor movement now?

I don't really know. I can't say that I feel optimistic. Its pretty tough now, I think. They're trying to build membership and as I'm hearing they're having a problem doing that. I don't know if that's a fact or not but from what I read and what I hear they're losing members. Then also, they've got to lose members when you look at all the layoffs and that sort of thing. Where they had the biggest number of members, all those places are nonexistent now.

Ohio is one of the states that's been really heavily impacted by that.

I can't say that I'm optimistic. You know, there was one question on here; I'm not the interviewer, but (laughing)

You go right ahead...

It was on here... something about diversity and I thought....

(both talking)

...when I was involved, diversity didn't exist, you know, we had, at that time, what was called affirmative action. Remember all those days back then? And it was only much later that they started talking about diversity and that sort of thing. I thought, oh, that wasn't even a consideration.

In the context of your work on 925, issues like that didn't come up and get talked about even? Is that what you mean? Or you're talking about at Cuyahoga Community College?

I'm talking about both, right. At both 925 and the college. Like I say, affirmative action was very weak and there were, what do I want to call them, we had hearings and that sort of thing that were more for show or to say that we did this or we question this or that sort of thing but there was never any change or that sort of thing. When I speak of affirmative action I'm speaking of at the college. That's the way that it was. Everything was discussed but there were never any changes. We had an Affirmative Action Committee, which was composed of administrators, faculty, and staff because you had to have it, I think, if you received government funds or something like that. But it certainly wasn't effective at all.

Are you saying the top positions in the college were held mostly by whites?

Oh, definitely. Definitely.

In spite of the fact that 70% of the student body was African American?

Absolutely. Absolutely. In fact, I even went on one. We had all these committees formed and we visited colleges to recruit Black instructors and that sort of thing. We brought tons of resumes that I'm sure are still stacked up at 700 Carnegie... have never been looked at. The number of Black faculty, well, and administrators, too, but primarily faculty. Because faculty interacts with the students, I think it's most important. Well, we're losing Black faculty. The males are all retiring and they're not being replaced. It's kind of sad because we need role models. And it's just not happening.

Let me ask a kind of bold question.

I'm bold, that's OK.

When you participated and got involved in running for president of 92, a union that was led by white women...

Why did they elect me? (Laughing)

Not why did they elect you. They elected you probably because of your ability. But did you feel any kind of discomfort around your relations with your other African American co-workers about participating in a white women's organization?

No, not in the least. Your question is different than what I expected.

What were the issues for you?

Not in the least bit because the college, as I said, the metropolitan campus was your urban campus and your most Black campus of all. Western, at that time, was totally lily white and that kind of thing, and the people at the Western campus...I discovered the support staff were very similar to the support staff at Metro except they were White and those were Black. They were poor, struggling women trying to make a living.

And they were probably heads of families.

Absolutely, the very same situation. So, anyway I didn't feel that I was ostracized by any of my Black co-workers because...

No one said, "Oh you're a token," or anything ...

No, nobody did because, like I said, even before we were unionized I had started my own grievance and talked to some other people about, you know, you're really not being paid for what you're doing, and that kind of thing.

Make a comment on the theme you thought I was going to raise.

I thought you were going to say how did I feel being president and being Black and then having this totally white campus. See, because Western Campus... we always called it Parma University. (Laughing.) Parma's a little town out there. Because they used to just have fits if they had to come to a meeting at the Metropolitan campus because it was in the inner city. So they were totally separate. So, as president, going to the Western Campus, that was an experience. But, they wanted raises and they wanted better working conditions, too. I was bold enough to go out there and I didn't think they were any different than I was, which they weren't. So, it worked out. They were a little bit hesitant about having...

About coming in?

...about having a Black as a president.

How could you tell they were hesitant?

Why? Because one of the people who had the same position that I had as a recruiter and admissions officer at the Western campus, we were very good friends. She had been out at West all this time and she knew all of them and she said, "Oh, God you're never going to get these folks to..." you know...but they're fine. They're doing well now. They still don't come to Metro. (Laughing)

It's kind of a phenomenon in our society where it's sort of expected that Whites will have leadership positions over integrated groups but it's not so expected that African Americans will lead groups that are mainly White.

I think that they were hesitant to do it just like many of the Blacks were because they had that " Oh I'll lose my job" or something like that and I didn't have that fear so I said let somebody get out there and get chewed up.

You could tell them, as public employees, they really couldn't be fired.

Right. Right, Absolutely.

They might temporarily be fired. I'm sure you have some anecdotes there lurking in the deep, dark of your memories.

You should have come twenty years ago (laughing)

(Interviewer unclear)

Yeah, bury 'em. I don't want to deal with that anymore, right. It was an experience, I enjoyed it, and like I said, I'm sure I learned quite a bit from it. I can't tell you what but I certainly did. I think you grow from any experience.

Well, a number of women I've interviewed have mentioned how especially if they came into the union as either staff or officers from the workforce, they never thought they could stand up in front of a group and give a speech.

Well that was my job, so...I had to do presentations at the high schools, for businesses, for social agencies and so forth so it wasn't a problem. It was something I did all the time. It never bothered me. Who else will you be interviewing--I'm just curious--in the local area?

Now you said that you retired a year ago. Are you involved in any activities that are similar to what you were doing in your profession or the union at this point?

As a volunteer? I volunteer at the library with the reading program. No, I'm not doing anything that I used to.

Family work, is what you're saying?

Family work, right.

Is there anything else you'd like to add about your ideas about the legacy of 925? Have I covered everything?

I think you've covered it very well.

OK. So we'll stop here.