Peggy Torzewski
Interviewed by Ann Froines
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Cleveland, Ohio

I am interviewing Peggy Torzewski on December 7, 2005, in her office in Cleveland, Ohio. Let's start by you telling me the story of how you first entered 925. What made you go to that first meeting, that first discussion?

Actually that happened when I was working at the Euclid Public Library. It was back in 1986, I think. I was working actually at the Euclid High School library. At that point in time, the public library system was contracted by the school board to man the school libraries as well as the public library system in Euclid. They've had that arrangement for 25, 30 years. So I worked at the high school library. What was kind of weird is, only at the high school and the middle school were the librarians hired by the school board because of state laws. But otherwise, all the rest of the school libraries were manned by Euclid Public Library employees.

Back at that time--it's been kind of hard—I've been trying to recall these things, and there's a lot of things I've forgotten, and probably will remember of course when we're all through. But back in the mid '80's, the schools were going through some changes. As well as the libraries, and library funding, a little bit, was going through changes. But in the school systems, some of the schools in Euclid were closing and they were merging, changing the whole set up. So that some of our school libraries were actually getting ready to close. We did not have a union at that time. There were no provisions for what happens when school closes, and to people that work in those schools. I worked at the high school, and that was the only high school; that wasn't going to close. And kind of in conjunction with that, and my time lines are probably a little screwed up but these are things that I remember, that the libraries were also having a hard time with funding because I think at that point they were switching over to this local library government support fund where a dedicated portion of the state income tax was going to be granted to libraries for funding. So there were some tie-ups in funding while they were working through all those issues.

And one of the other things that happened was at the public library, the main library, that served the rest of the public, the library was just arbitrarily cutting off time and a half that people were paid to work on Sundays. And that was those employees. The school people didn't work in the libraries on the Sundays.

So I think there were just a series of things going on. And there had been library organizing going on here in Cleveland. Cleveland Public Library had just organized; Cuyahoga County Library had organized. We had a staff association at the library that I was not in the leadership of—I was a member of as a member of the staff, but I think people were getting a little nervous about things, and that leadership determined that maybe it was time to look at a union. I think people had talked on and off for several

years about boy, we should be organized. When I started working for the library in late 1980, my pay was $2.01 an hour. We didn't even fall under minimum wage provisions. And it was very shortly after that, I believe in 1981 actually, that the laws changed, that the libraries had to come up to minimum wage. So at that point I think it went up to $3.25. But then all those other people that had worked with me at the library, and had been there for many years, everyone was kind of brought up the same, if they weren't already paid in that range. But I was in the clerical work. I was a library assistant at the high school. Pay was always an issue there.

People with MLS degrees—were they getting a better--?

They were getting a better salary, and I can't actually quite remember what they were making, but I'm sure it was relatively poor, as was the clericals. And that's when the changes were coming about in library world in Ohio because the unions—925 had come into Ohio. I don't know if any of the other libraries had been organized. Collective bargaining had come into Ohio for public employees I think in early—like '84, '82, or '83. There were some libraries that their staff association had asked for official recognition. So that kind of started that movement a little bit to try to better things.

Is Euclid--excuse me for interrupting--a suburb of Cleveland?

Euclid is a suburb of the Cleveland area in Cuyahoga County. It's just east of Cleveland, along Lake Erie. There's about 50, 55 thousand people in the city of Euclid.

So your first contact then with 925 was what you remember then?

Yes, I remember that the leaders of our staff association invited several unions in to speak to the members of the staff association. One of them being 925, and actually it was—there could have been an organizer there, but I think more that I recall was one of the members of the union at Cuyahoga County Library, Chris Grimaldi. At that time I think she was the president of that chapter there. And she came and talked to us. And a couple of others; there were a couple of other people too from that chapter, but I remember Chris, because I worked with Chris later on, working with the union. And we also had invited another union that I can't even tell you who it was right now, because it just was very evident that 925 felt a more comfortable fit.

And from there, we started our organizing committee. Tom Hoffman was organizing for 925 at that time, and he was our organizer. And he came in and met with us. Again, I can't recall any specifics, but in retrospect, knowing what happens here now, I'm sure they just said, "People who are interested in this come to a union meeting," was the first thing, probably, to have a meeting with everybody, and then after that, an organizing committee. And I just from the start felt like, "Well, we need to do this. There's just no question about it." And at that point in time also, in my own personal life, my husband had had a near-fatal accident at work in 1983, and this would have been like 1986, and my kids were in elementary school. And he was in private industry in a manufacturing plant. So he had a union at his shop. Was very involved in his union there, up until the

point of time of his accident. So our life had changed dramatically because of that too. So it just seemed to make sense that I knew if we were going to get anywhere in the library, we needed to work together. The board of trustees, if you wanted to go talk about getting raises, if you went as a staff association, they said, "Well that's nice," and you felt like you were getting patted on the head and sent out the door like reluctant children.

And nothing really happened.

And nothing happened by going to the board. So we did start organizing—

You joined that organizing committee the first—

Yeah. Right from the start. There were probably 10 or 12 of us on that committee. And Tom met with us at someone else's home. Gosh, I can't even remember Joanne's last name right now. But we met at her home, and the thing was, we knew that she was someone who probably once we organized would probably not be able to be in the union, because she had some supervisory type duties and oversaw other people. And—

Do you remember what your first tasks were, as a member of the organizing committee? Can you describe them?

Oh wow. Well, what I do remember is Tom probably laid out what happens now that we're here. And what we did was divide down the staff, and it was our responsibility to go and talk to other members of the staff. And Tom was kind of like our...

Coach, or mentor?

Coach. You're right, exactly. He was our mentor, our coach, whatever. He tried to give us answers, he'd pull things together, he helped nervous people, he'd walk through with us what it is we needed to do, and just seemed to be very calm and collected, and was very calm that I never felt nervous at all that Tom knew what he was doing and very confident about, which in retrospect he said, "Well, you know, Peg, that was my first organizing drive." And again, in retrospect on the end where I'm working for the union, you just have to put aside whatever nerves and butterflies you have and move forward. And he was just really—he worked so well. And it was all women that were on our organizing team. And I think at that time—there are some women that are just up and out, no matter what. I'm not particularly someone that would go looking for trouble, or I guess that I would consider to be a really active person. But it just seemed like we needed to do something, and I at least wanted to be a part of that. Because I probably wanted to make sure that it would be what I wanted... So that was our assignment.

Recruiting...?

We all had to recruit people. Just go talk to people. He talked to us about the fact that you don't sign the cards yet. You talk to people and you assess people; you see how they feel about it. Are people really strong about wanting a union or not? Who are the strong

ones; who are the maybe's; who are the ones that just don't want it at all. And at a certain point in time, we would put out the cards. But we had to get everybody ready first. And that was difficult. But we all did that. So we went out and we started talking to members. And as a committee, when we'd come back together and meet again, it would be whatever we questions we had; Tom would say, "What did people say and what are the questions." We'd get some newsletters going. If it wasn't working very well with one of us talking to one person, and we thought, "Well, I know that person. I can talk to that person." Or if we had someone who would be a strong yes person. And they knew Susie over some place else, then you'd say, "Well, I'll ask Jane to call Susie," is kind of how that works. So we really, in retrospect, we organized ourselves, with someone who showed us how to organize ourselves.

So it reached the point, in all of our assessments, we felt we had—I think at that time, 925 was like at 60%--you had to have 60% to file, because if you're going to file, you want to be ready to get moving. When we were ready, we thought, with the assessments, when Tom thought we were ready, then he says, "Well, here, you're ready, take your cards and go do them." And I think we had our cards signed like in less than a week, maybe 3 or 4 days, we had all the cards signed, at least 60%.

I think what was wonderful about it was talking to the women that I worked with. Working in the high school—I mean, we all got together a couple of times a year as the whole staff. But you never really knew a lot of the staff. And of course, that's what management counted on. But by doing this, we went out to other people in the system, to see what the other problems were, compare notes about what worked, what didn't work; what you were paid, what you weren't paid; and so forth. I came to appreciate how hard the decision was for these wonderful women that I worked with to make the decision to go ahead and sign this card. There's people that were ready to sign right away, didn't feel hindered in any way. There were people who had worked there maybe 15 years, and were worried they were going to get fired for signing a card. There were some that I think had some concerns—"Oh, well, my husband says this" and "My husband says that" or "We don't think we should." There were some others that said, "Well, my husband, my uncle, somebody was in a union and had a bad experience." It was eye-opening. To this day, I appreciate what started back again.

Had you ever had any experience organizing anything before that?

Not like this. Not that I would say necessarily. I went to an all-girls Catholic high school, and Catholic grade school, so I was comfortable around women. I'd been around women so much. And had about a year, year and a half of college, which actually was a very small college. I was involved in Campfire Girls all through grade school and high school. So I guess you could say there's some organizing-type things there, but nothing of this nature. And even though my background was that way, still wasn't really involved... You kind of wondered about women's movement and so forth, but that wasn't per se on my radar, to be really radical about that. I grew up in a family of seven children, and my parents and grandparents were like bankers and professional people, and Dad was a salesman and went up through the ranks of sales in his office, and about the

only union experience would have been when my brothers, sometimes during the summer they worked in the steel mills during summer breaks while in college. And they might have been union there. But union just wasn't really something that was talked about. But for me it was people working together to say, "We really need to do something, because it could be better for us here." And that's what we did.

Aside from the abysmally low pay, were there other experiences you had as an office worker in the libraries that you felt were unjust, that needed to be changed?

There was no set way for people to know how to get more money. The squeaky wheel syndrome seemed to apply there, that if people went and complained, the director probably gave them extra money to get off his back. He was a very nice man, but in the library there was just no rhyme or reason as to how people got money. And if you got an annual increase, it was by whatever the board decided you would get. And the board just really kind of dismissed people. I think those things worked to pull us together. To me, to say, this just isn't right. And then also seeing what my husband had, the good times that he went through in the union. After his accident, quite frankly, I was disappointed in the way the union worked with him, treated him, however you want to do it.

Was he in IBEW, or what was the union he was in?

No, he was in the glass and plastic—glass bottle blowers one. He was a maintenance trouble-shooter in a plastics plant, and got hurt—was electrocuted on the job. So it really just set things in motion for me and for him that he thought the union would stand up for him. But it was just a very complicated thing. He had gone back to work for a while, but ended up not being able to stay at work and went on disability. But it was disappointing that I think people just didn't know how to react to him, or to help him or not help him or whatever. It just was a very uncomfortable reminder, I think for the union as well as management, that here is this man that went through this traumatic injury, and did acquire permanent health injuries as a result, but at the time, nobody just quite knew what to do, including my husband. And it was awkward for a while. But it didn't stop me from knowing that the unions did other good things. And he's actually still on that roster, indirectly, at the union there. He's probably one of the most senior people there now, and I don't know that he necessarily derives any benefit from that. But he did go back to work long enough to vest a pension. So I could see for him that the union was important to him while he was there.

So he supported you in your efforts to participate.

Yes. It would get a little frustrating at times, realizing that it took—the time element and the change, just the slow change, but he did support my efforts. He knew we needed a union there, could never understand why we didn't have a union there.

Did you feel like the clerical staff in the libraries weren't respected by the higher-ups, or by the public?

I don't know necessarily. I think clerical staff is taken for granted a lot. The library is not a bad place to work unless you have really bad bosses. Then it can be a horrible place to work. I don't think things were that bad totally at Euclid Public Library. And then those of us in the schools, even though we worked for the library, we really were more responsive to the leadership of the schools: who your principals were and stuff; they had a lot of that there. So I think I learned more about people and women and so forth working in the high school, and indirectly in the library, but that's where my center was. And to see how life was for those young men and women that started out there and ended up there—that really is where I think I became even more conscious, over the years. The unions started some of that. I mean, it started before the union. And made me aware of women, and what happens to women, and to see what happens to girls in schools. But I knew of course a lot of the teachers in the schools too, so I had these different groups to see. So the union just kind of complemented—I could see an intersection there, like, "Well, we don't want this for our kids when we're growing up. We want them to have something more than we have." So I could see that as a continuation of maybe being more of an example the students look up to you all the time. They look to you for guidance. A lot of them do. Just quietly, you don't even know it, that they're always watching you. In a library they come in a non-threatening atmosphere. I'm not there to grade them. I might tell them to be quiet in study hall, but I'm not there to judge them in the same way a teacher is. So, a lot of times they'll come to you, just to be an adult person they can talk to and get some kind of advice from. So I think then it just kind of struck me, just really the different role that I had as a worker in the library, as a worker in a school. And then when the union came along, to see the potential there for how much better life could be, and help these women realize that this education was so important for them to keep going, and not get caught up in all the boy-girl things and all of that stuff that goes on in school.

You mentioned that as a young woman you didn't have a lot of consciousness about the women's movement or women's issues. As you entered 925, and became an active member of the union, did that change? Did you then see any more...did you perceive these women in any different way, the leaders of 925, as a result of—

I admired them. Anne Hill was my mentor. After Tom organized us. The way I learned my unionism with 925 was, whatever I was doing, to always try to maintain the higher moral ground. He always told us that, no matter what people did. And the Euclid Library didn't give a really negative hard fight against the union there. They did more traditional things. So I was lucky that I worked in an atmosphere that I don't think that women were treated that way. So I met Tom, and he organized us, and then it transitioned over to Anne, who was then going to be my rep, and get our contract going and everything. And I think that was—Anne's just a dynamo. She was my mentor, and I learned so much from her, and women in the union. She was my most direct person that I saw for a long time. It did—it just opened my eyes to things that maybe people could do. After we'd also organized, I was elected as the president of that chapter, which to me was I think a real turning point. Because in the past and different points in my life, I was always willing to volunteer, and never quite willing I guess to run as a leadership position and yet people wanted me to do that. So at this time I did it, I jumped in with both feet,

and it terrified me. But Anne taught me a lot. It was just like a process that you don't even realize that you're growing, and you're growing in your ability to deal with people. I think I always dealt with people pretty well anyway. But then to deal with it on a different level, and to learn to deal as an equal, and an equal with power. I don't think I ever understood what power meant. And the first taste of it was when we won that election. It was very outstanding, and people had come to us, and said—because it was in the local papers and stuff—and said, "Wow! We just can't believe library people!" They always have this concept of library people, even to this day. So that was very interesting and very encouraging and very gratifying, to know that it wasn't just my victory, it was a victory for all of us. And I think for me, that's always what's been... Anne's there to always advocate for people. To help people. So that's what indirectly and very quietly but firmly, she was helping us grow as leaders. She'd always be there. She'd want us to do things—whatever we could—but she was always available by phone, if we weren't there during negotiations or something; always answered my questions. Sent us to trainings—one of the first trainings that our team went to was actually down at the AFL-CIO in Cleveland, with all these different union leaders, including the Teamsters. Oh, and the Teamsters took us under their wings. Those people that went, "Well, you ladies need to do this and that," but I think we were tickled by it—it was amusing—but we also liked it, because it was nice to have attention of other people that "We can help you do this." "If you need some help, you give us a call" type stuff. So it was a growing process, a little nerve-wracking. I'm basically a shy person and there's still a really shy part of me. But when I know what I'm...feel comfortable in my venue, I can overcome whatever butterflies are there, just to kind of try to put that front on. And a lot of people were looking to me to help them through. And I still just knew we needed to do what we needed to do. And the leadership of the union was there to support us, whenever we needed.

Growing up, did you know about unions and workplace struggles? Can you describe a little of your family background?

I can't say that I really did, that I was conscious of it. I'm one of 7 children; I'm the oldest daughter; I'm third in line. And our ages—there's like two families within my family. There were four of us all born within four or five years of each other, and there was an eight-year gap. And then my Mom and Dad had three more. So there were always a lot of kids in the family. A close family. And what I always thought was a normal family life. But in the future here I see that I was very blessed. Because I had a loving family that had its problems, just as others, and my parents' family and friends were all similar. Some were teachers, some were plumbers, some were bankers, some were, you know, all different. Mom was a traditional Mom for many years, stayed home. Mom was an only child, so this was very interesting to have seven, and Dad was one of three. And he was again a salesman, and had kind of worked his way up. I didn't know a whole lot about his work other than some of the places that he worked.

Was he away a lot?

He was away. He was away, but I just remember him being there a lot too. Because we did seem to do a lot as families, and church was important, and school, and I was always involved in activities in school, all the way up through high school, one way or another. Not so much sports, because I was a little clutzier, and when I went to school you had to be good at sports. It's not like it is today, that everybody can join the sports. But I always felt I had my parents' attention when I needed it, and of course having six brothers and sisters was an interesting life also. My grandmothers died when I was very little. I was like 5. So I just have faint memories of them. My grandpas were around a little longer than that. I was a teenager when one died, and my other grandpa died when I was in my 20s. So I was very close to the one that died when I was in my 20s. So Dad was around but we always had the family and these friends that they had. I grew up in a neighborhood with kids in almost every household, so I had just a lot of good memories, even though I have that shy streak and so forth, was a babysitter, so took care of kids from a young age on within my own family as well as from outside of the family.

My Mom did go to work at a certain point in life. Dad had lost a job. But that wasn't 'til actually after I was married. But she still had young kids in the second group of family at home, so that was probably in the '70s, that she went to work part time at what was Higby's then and now Dillard's here in Cleveland.

Is it a department store?

A department store, yes. It's kind of interesting as time went on with Mom, working at Dillard's for many years, and she actually retired there when she was about 74. But saying all along, "You know, Peg, we really need a union here." So that was kind of interesting, and then as my brothers grew—and then I got married young. I was 20 when I got married and first son at 21, and 23, so I was a housewife for a while there, and then when we had the gas crisis—no, even before that, we lived in Michigan. I met my husband in Michigan. We lived there a few years. We were struggling, because at that point we both had just over a year in college, and then we left college, and we had an auto accident, and I was recuperating from that for about a year, and then we got married. So I went to work—my first job, when I had to go to work, because he had been ill for a little bit, and we needed the extra income, was actually at a Hardy's restaurant. I think that's where I really was very frustrated. Because here I had my son who was just a year old, my husband at home, and that's when I went to places—I looked at in like a drugstore—to work at a drugstore, or a 5 and dime or something like that. "Well, what are you going to do with your child." And I'm like, "My child's taken care of; I can do this job." I had no doubt that I could do these jobs that they wanted. I really felt very insulted. And very patronized. So I guess you could say some of that indirectly definitely stoked some fires in me that I have a need, and here people are worried—you know I wouldn't be applying for the job if I didn't think I could do it or couldn't take care of my children and still work. So I ended up working at a Hardy's restaurant, with—I think the manager was probably two years older than me. I've always been an efficient worker. I think the oldest woman there was probably a working mom at that point who was probably 30ish at the time, and it was mostly teenagers. So I quickly went up to like your leads of your shifts and stuff like that. But sometimes that manager—he was for the

most part pretty good, but when he'd get hassled, he'd hassle us. It was kind of silly when I think back about it, and very condescending. That really stoked some stuff in me, when that happened.

And then we moved back to Cleveland where my husband got this job in this factory, where he actually ended up having his accident. So again, I didn't work for a while, we had our second son, and I stayed home for a while. But then we had the gas crisis and energy crisis in the '70's. And that's late '70's. That's when I went back to work again part time, and a neighbor told me about working at the library. And that's when I went to Euclid Library.

Thinking back to your early years 925, do you remember any particular campaign or struggle that you were involved in that was memorable? You mentioned the elation you felt at winning the election. Were there other anecdotes about your collective bargaining experiences that you remember?

Pre or post working for the union?

Actually both.

I have the two. I have two stages because I started working for the union. [Negotiating the contract—]

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START of SIDE B of TAPE 1

--they were tough, but we had a really savvy attorney, we were fortunate. And Anne was very savvy and had worked with this attorney at Cuyahoga County Library. The leadership of the library was not really resistant. So I think we went through some of the normal struggles, but there was some joint efforts too. I think we probably did some informational picketing and stuff, but I don't remember. It was a struggle, and everyone was so nervous of course with the first contract. But Anne kept saying, "This is good, this is good," and so forth. And they even had a joint committee that worked on totally revamping our whole job classification system, and moneys and everything. It was just brilliant, when I think back on it, that we did that together.

Joint committee, management and the labor union?

Right. So that first contract, though a struggle, it was done and we did well. I think it was more the second contract, when we had a new director, who just really didn't get it about unions. And we did struggle when we went to the table for that second one. And that was the first time we really had to get into pressure campaigns, where we were really leafleting the public and so forth. And I can remember, there you packed your board of trustees meetings with members and made speeches and stuff. And I was the president at the time. And I knew who the board president was. We'd gotten to know the board members over that time. Pat [Jarko ?] was her name, who is since then deceased, but I

went to make my speech—Anne helped me with my speech—and I'm there, and she's over there. I can tell she's kind of like getting ready for this. And my heart was just beating, right like I thought everyone could hear it, you know? And I gave the speech, and I thought I was going to pass out, but I didn't, and everyone applauded at the end, and Mrs. Jarko got through it as the board president. And so we worked through those issues, and we had taken—I can't even remember if we took a strike vote or not. But what happened was, eventually that—not too long after that, that director actually left the library. And what I think is more remarkable to me, that has really colored my union experience and what I do now is, an internal employee, Donna Pertzog became the director. And we found a way to have a really positive successful relationship, and got into what's called win-win bargaining, interest-based bargaining here in this area, under the Federal Mediation Conciliation Services, where you use problem solving methods to do your negotiations. You take issue by issue. And it was still that same attorney, and Anne was kind of around at the time. We started the whole proactive labor-management process. Our first negotiations, using that process, where I was employee and member, is when I transitioned on the staff, right in the middle of that whole process. It was such a positive experience that we've continued to use that method since 1994 at Euclid Library; even though things aren't perfect, we still have our disagreements, but we still use that method negotiating. And I still think it helps us be able to talk and figure problems out, to the point that outside negotiation times, we're still in that mode of "how can we resolve these problems?" And I've never had to go to an arbitration there at all. And actually grievances—we start some and so forth? But even they don't get to be big problems. So I think times are changing a little more now. But we also had a very cooperative board of trustees through that whole process. And I think that's very unusual. And it really has colored my whole way of trying to approach labor-management relations. And that's one of the big things, I think, that 925 gave me. And it was supported and encouraged where it would work. Where it didn't work, we knew what we had to do. But I was able then to take that to some of these other library systems that I work with now, especially when they're smaller, and management would complain, "Oh, we've lost. Oh, that outside group is coming in." But it's helped to foster those relationships. And it kind of still colors even when you go into traditional negotiations, the way that I probably approach it with my team members versus when you haven't used that process. So that stands out for me. That was positive.

Would you describe briefly the real difference between that process and the traditional negotiating process?

Yes. In a traditional process, each party is exchanging: "I want this." "I want that." You give concrete language to say, "We want this change, we want this to happen" and so forth. And that's what the library or union do with each other, or whoever the employer happens to be at that point. It was mostly libraries for me with 925. And then you start out slow, kind of trading blustery things, and grandstanding, and as time goes on then you're kind of narrowing what is acceptable and isn't acceptable. But it's basically coming to an agreement on language that everyone can live with, or if you can't, then the issue usually goes off the table. And some problems that you have at work just don't

lend themselves to language in a contract. Or management would never want to put that as language in a contract.

But in a different approach for places where you've had successful labor-management committees, where you work together during off-contract years. Then to go back into this traditional mode can sometimes be contentious if you're used to trying to solve problems. So this win-win method, which we call interest-based bargaining here in Ohio, which we learned from the Federal Mediation and Conciliation Services, was that you instead of saying "I want this" and "I want that," you say what the problem is. So if the problem is that we're having problems with everyone scheduling vacation, or people getting vacation when they want it, then rather than the union saying "I want this" and management saying "I want that," you go through sessions of "Well, what are our interests in trying to resolve the problem." So for example, management wants to make sure they have people to cover the schedules; they'd like to give people vacations when they want them but they need to cover the schedules, it needs to be economically affordable so they're not having to hire subs all the time, and so forth. And for the union, it would be, people just would like as much as possible to take vacation when they want to do it, and to do it in a fair manner. So you have those common interests. So you find that there's a lot of commonality in the interests, and from that then you just brainstorm all these possible ideas about how you can resolve it. It might be with scheduling; it might be amount of vacation; it could be bidding; all kinds of things. And from there, the two parties develop the specific criteria they will use to judge options which then end up in a resolution that all parties work together. So you have to share information, you have to be as honest and open with each other as possible, and be willing to come to consensus. It's consensus-building, is what it is. So it's different, it may not be better or worse, it's just a different way, that's what we try to emphasize. Sometimes it's better, sometimes it's not. Some places you just know it's not going to work at all. But it is a different way of doing it, where people are willing to try to do it that way.

And in your work today, do you try to encourage that approach as much as possible, as preferable, or—

Sometimes, I've used it in some places where it's worked well, and actually now I can even see in some places where it used to work, that it's no longer working, because the times have changed so much in recent years. In public employment, funding has changed so much, that impacts almost everything else that you do.
And of course working conditions where staffing is cut back and so forth. So I think there's places and times when it's appropriate, and times when it's not, when I know we're going to have to fight to get what we want.

You mentioned that when you did that first campaign, some women responded that their jobs were at risk. How did you deal with that? What did it feel like for you to have to approach them and make them feel that maybe their jobs were at risk?

I had to really listen, to try to hear. They were worried about their jobs, but I also had to help strengthen who they were and what they did, and help them feel good about

themselves. And to point out to them what good and loyal employees they had been. That there's no reason why this library should fire them. I think we knew, and certainly the union had told us, people can be fired and then we file charges and get the jobs back. But somehow I think I also had a sense...I just didn't feel like that was just going to happen. And maybe that was naïve of me to feel that way. So I would just talk, and talk to them, and listen to them. And they'd have to think some more; call them back another time. And I came to really respect these women, and understand what they had to go through that I didn't. Because at that point, I was in my late 20s. And some of these were women that were maybe 10 years or maybe older than that. But to try to understand their concerns and their fears, and to try to waylay them as much as possible. And then to also to try to encourage them that it's much better to be public about it, with the rest of us, because then if something did happen, we could point back to the fact that you did support. And just try to remind them that you've been a good employee. If you're a good employee, and you <u>are</u> a good employee, and I think they were, you shouldn't really have anything to worry about, about losing your job. And then I also knew at the rate of pay that we were being paid, that most people probably (laughs)—there's a lot of people that didn't want jobs like that. Unfortunately, that was one of the realities, too, that we were just trying to improve things for everyone. We had some good benefits. We had to pay what I thought was a lot of money for our health insurance. But because we didn't have money, that's where we had sick leave that we could use; we had some pretty good vacation time for school people, at least for part of the time, we didn't work in the summers, because the schools were closed. Or if we did, we could take some extra leave time if we chose to. So it was a good job for women with families—it really was. So I think people were a little worried that they didn't really need the union, that we were going to upset the apple cart now...

The other thing was, I think that they were kind of looking to buy the line, "Well the union is an outside group." And we said, "Well, no, it's me. <u>I'm</u> here talking to you, and it's Melanie, and it's Mary," and my other friends that were out talking to everybody. "It's all of us. Tom Hoffman's here helping us"—and everybody really liked Tom. He was a very likeable person. "But," I said, "It's all of <u>us</u> talking to you." And I did have one woman, I can just remember, a couple of women in particular, but it took her I think —she didn't sign the card right away, and I think even up to the election I don't think she had signed a card. But I just knew, that when she did finally sign that card, and give me that card, it was such a breakthrough moment for her! And I just felt like for people to entrust me with those experiences and these fragile parts of their lives—and even to this day, it still goes on. I think <u>that</u> is—I mean, that's why I do what I do. And that's what keeps me going when you just feel like I can't move another step, or I can't take another hour, I just gotta leave—it's just remembering...

I don't want to discount the men. Because I'm very conscious of the men. It's the industries that I represent are a majority of women. And I didn't want to ignore men either. And there are some great guys that we've met along the way. But for these women, some of these women, these were really very, very difficult decisions for them to make. So they really entrusted us with something very valuable.

Tell me, as an administrative organizer now, what industries do you represent, besides the library workers.

I still do my libraries. I actually represent Cleveland State University, which we'd organized under 925. I guess we finished our first contract before we had merged. It was kind of all around the same time, I think. And I represent the Cuyahoga County Board of MR/DD, their professional staff there. Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities. They're the folks who create plans for people that are mentally disabled, and so forth, and work plans, and home plans, and how to go on with life. I also did at one point a place in Ashtabula called the Community Counseling Center that provided mental health services for the community and so forth. That was a always very fragile area. So people with very fragile lives, and people that have great responsibility over people's lives. I greatly appreciate what these people do, and the populations that they serve. I also have a brother who has Down's Syndrome. So it makes me appreciate even more, and want to watch even more, what they do and how they do it, and they've been not only elemental in doing what they do for their consumers, but also in giving me guidance for my family, with my brother, too. So it's a very interesting world that I work in, and a very small world, when we all come around to it. There's a lot of good that the public does, and it always hurts me to hear public workers being torn down, and unions being torn down, because they're just so wrong. I know why they do it, but it's just so wrong, because there's very few people that could really do what a lot of the people that I represent do, and do it well, and keep people going. So that's most of the people that I represent, and the work that I do.

When it was proposed that you join the staff, can you share that story, and what your decision-making was? Was it a hard decision for you?

Yes and no. At that point in my life—I'm trying to think if maybe they might have suggested something like that a little earlier, when my kids were still younger, but at that point, my youngest son—I have two boys—and my youngest son had finished high school in 1994. And he was getting ready to go off to California to go to college. And my older son was in town. He'd done some community college, but had done jobs, music, the whole thing. He was my [artisan/artist son]. At that point I thought I would be going back to school, maybe. To go back to school, I was looking at a paralegal-type profession, and to continue to do that while I was working at the library. And I also knew we had to worry about these college bills, because he was going to a private school. And then Anne had approached me because there was an opening here. And at that point also, in 1994, the relationship between the schools and the library had changed. And again, moneys were tightening up and so forth, and the library was looking for more of a shared cost for the services it provided to the schools. There was an agreement then, actually, that the libraries were going to pull out of the schools. I was involved in the first wave—the first year the high school and middle school were going to go, and the second year the elementaries. So we had to work all through that with the union, with people bumping and so forth. It was a very difficult time in the union, and a very tense time.

So I was in the first wave at the high school. And I ended up actually displacing someone in the elementary schools, right at the end of the school year, and that summer we had started the transition, and that's when Anne had called and said, "Peggy, we have this position open if you want it." And I pretty much knew I had a job in the library, because I had more seniority and so forth, even by the time we'd go through the second wave and end up all in the main library. And at that point, my husband was totally disabled, but in a pretty good spot in his life at least with his injury, and we were ok with where we were going. And then we talked about the future. And it was definitely more money, we thought more job security, health insurance and so forth. And the work, because he knew how much I really liked the work that I was doing in the chapter, too. So at that point, he says, "You need to stop and think about you and your future." He says, "If you want to do this, I will support your doing it." So I guess I kind of put my paralegal school thing on one end, and decided to go ahead and jump in and apply for this position. And applied and was interviewed by Anne and Debbie, at the time. And also met with all of the leaderships, which had been my peers. We had like a council of all the presidents of the chapters in the greater Cleveland area.

Is that the same as the executive board?

The executive board was for all of 925, which was throughout the country. So this was just this Cleveland area region, that all the presidents would meet from time to time. So I was their peer, in that regard, when we met all the time. But at that point, I was going to be sitting as the person representing them, and having to address them. But I knew them, and I knew what their concerns were because I'd lived them, and I told them "I think I can do this for you. And I know that Anne and Debbie"—Debbie Schneider, the president —had said that they would help me. So I jumped—they offered me the position, and I accepted the position.

Of course, seeing it as a member, and seeing Anne and what she did for me, or anyone else that represented me, versus actually then going into it, and being the person doing it —it was overwhelming. It's a challenging job. Because the responsibility just multiplies immediately. But I jumped in there. At that point it was Anne in the Cleveland office and Carol Sims, who was the only other organizer—rep, whatever you want to call them, whatever we were called in those days. It was the three of us working on the contracts, and at that point Anne was also the executive director and secretary-treasurer of the union, so she was kind of backing out of some of the contract stuff. And then we had some of the office people. We had Dolores—I can't remember Dolores' last name—was like our support staff. And then we had a couple of the people who actually were like the support staff for the national union 925 in our offices. But it was mainly Carol and me—

So it was an office of about 6 or 8 people?

Exactly. 6 or 8 women. It was still pretty small. I just felt immediately welcomed by all of them.

Was it all on-the-job training, or did you actually have any trainings prior to your taking on staff responsibilities?

Yes, we had some trainings. It was on the job, as well as going to planned trainings. I'd gotten a lot of training as a leader, whenever I could, and at that point, there was a lot of training that was offered by SEIU, by the international. Anne would bring them in—Anne and Debbie, or whoever was doing that at the time. Or Karen—that's right, Karen was still here at one point until Clinton was elected and she went to work for him. But they would bring the international here to do trainings for us. Or they might have been in the region, so we would go to wherever they were for some of those trainings.

Do you remember what constituted some of the trainings?

Some of them were actually leadership, like how to be leaders, and communicating with members, and acting with members, and helping members, and stuff. Some of them were the grievance-arbitration process and so forth, and I met some more local leaders there, and so forth. There was grievance chair training. Always doing trainings on dealing with your members, grievance and stuff like that. I was just always anxious to go and learn whatever I could, because every time I did it, I became more comfortable with it, or felt my knowledge had expanded. I always loved to meet other people.

One of my first experiences, actually, after the union had been voted in, was the District 925 national executive board meeting. 925 was in Seattle and Boston and Cleveland and Cincinnati, and at that point I think we had some place in—I don't know if we were in Washington D.C., because actually 925 was in Washington at first for a while, and some place else. So they were having their national meeting, executive board meeting, in Washington. Actually it was in Washington D.C. And I had never flown on a plane before. And here was my first experience—"Oh, come on, Peg, you gotta get to that. You're the president. You go to that meeting." So I had my first—as strange as that sounds these days? That was new for me to take a plane and fly there, and to meet my peers. That's the first time—I had met a couple of them when we were organizing, like Chris Grimaldi then, who had come to talk to us about the union—she was there, and some of the others that were around locally, and they all said, "Well, come on, Peg, we'll show you the ropes." And of course God bless Anne. She always said, "We'd like you to do this, and come meet these people or those people or "We should be leafleting here or there," and here was this group of women that had been through this before, and they all loved Anne too, but they said, "Come on, Peg. We're going to show you the ropes." So we got on a bus and hopped and just took like a little quick tour of Washington! So I don't know that Anne ever knew that we were--! She probably knew we were doing all these things. Because we always made room for the work too, and did the work we needed to do. But they were like, "Oh, Anne sometimes is just a little too intensive. Come on. We'll take you around." And it was a nice way to get to know them too...So then, coming back into that then, later on, these were the people [to whom] I then became the Anne-type person. (laughs) So it was a totally different point of view when I became the Anne-type person. But nonetheless, that's how I started deciding to work here.

It was very intimidating at first. A lot of it was seat of the pants. I did go to the training —the Meany Center was under reconstruction so they held it in Baltimore at the University of Maryland, they have that intensive training. And I'm glad it was a few months after I had started, because at least I'd had a little head start. A couple of my counterparts who had just been hired went with me, and had never been to anything like that. It was very intensive, and I guess I began to question, "Now do I really want to do this?", after going through that. But Carol [Sims] was always there to help me. Carol is just a remarkable woman. Carol's the street smarts, I'm the naïve person. So Carol always wants to take care of me. And Anne, whenever I could, was always there for me to ask questions. As time went on a little longer and we grew, so we had a little bit more money, Anne would have the attorneys come and help us brush up on skills if we needed to. And then after a while, we had a little more independence. We were able to call the attorneys a little more for advice if we really needed to. But most times, we tried to brainstorm among ourselves. But it did reach a point where we had enough going on that we would use the attorneys. I knew I had really reached the point that the first place that Anne gave me to organize by myself was a smaller library, the Willoughby East Lake Library. It was probably two and a half years in or so, and I successfully organized them and then I had to negotiate the contract. And it was the eleventh hour—it was like 2 in the morning, we were trying to finish up—there was just something I really needed some advice on, about how to wrap something up in this wage area, because we were doing a re-opener-type thing, and I'd never done that before. And I thought I knew what I was doing. I tried to call Anne at 2 in the morning. You know, this was the days before cell phones. We didn't have cell phones. Couldn't get a hold of Anne. Tried to call Carol. Couldn't get a hold of Carol.

When you say Carol you mean—

Carol Sims. I'm in this church, with people looking to me to finish. And actually management, too, because everybody wanted to finish. So I finally called my husband, at 2 in the morning. And I said, "Honey, I don't know what to do here!" And he says, well, he walked me through it, and I think that was when I finally—I was always so tough on myself. And I finally learned to say, "You're doing the best that you can. And it's gonna be good, and just whatever happens happens. So just go and do it." And I did it. And I think that's when I really, totally, graduated, to feel like, "Ok, I survived, and I did ok, and..."

Did you feel like you made the right decision at that point?

Yes.

It didn't matter in a way.

It didn't matter at that point, because I told myself I wasn't going to beat myself up if it wasn't. But in the end, I made a good decision. And I never asked anybody the question whether it was good or bad because I just didn't want to know at that—I think it was, though, in retrospect, I think I did a good job and it was a good decision, but I think that's

when I really, really, felt like I knew what I was doing and felt comfortable and more accepting of myself and not trying to be so hard on myself. You can do that, you can really beat yourself up a lot in this job.

Now after these years of organizing and being a rep—I gather now the new terminology is administrative organizer?

We're administrative organizers, yes.

When you also are a rep and an organizer. Would you like to add anything about the values and tactics of 925? Do you believe there are different women's ways of organizing that show up in an organization like 925?

I think so. And I don't think I probably realized it, until after we merged and went with District 1199. Because I was just a part of that whole process. To me it was just a natural process and helping people come to a comfort level where they realize that they can take care of themselves and other people too, and have power and know how to use power. And I think that's what 1199 does, is help people come together and understand the power they have in coming together. And then understanding the power and using the power. Because that took me a long time to learn that and feel comfortable with that. And when we organized, it was we as employees organizing our other employees, with 925 helping us with that, and trying to give us every tool we needed. And I'm not going to say everything was perfect because it's not, I know it's not. But that's what they did. It was my union, and it was important that I take ownership for what was going on. And in retrospect and seeing how things are a little different with 1199, and knowing a little more of how others do it, I think they want people to take ownership. Sometimes you get impatient with it, and you want it to be done and over with, or you make a decision too fast. And maybe that was part of 925's thing is they could be more patient. They took the time to be patient with women, and men. Because the other image that I think 925 had, from one perspective is oh, it's that women's union. Why would any man want to belong to that women's union? I think there was, particularly where there were more men in one of the groups, that feeling like, "Oh, we have to be macho." Because I think they probably felt that 925 was run not only by women who were strong women, but women who probably were gay women.

Feminists...

Feminists, gay, the whole thing. So we also just had to help people understand, "We're here to empower everybody, and maybe..." And you could have women who felt strong and women who felt weak. So did the men. And I think sometimes the men felt...

END of SIDE 2 of TAPE 1
START of SIDE 1 of TAPE 2

--the organization's for everybody, including men who were skeptical?

Sometimes they were. Sometimes they just jumped right in. It's interesting. I think a lot of it could be also attached to people and how much education they have. I could see, you know, it did make a difference. It made a difference if we were organizing clerical people or professional people, versus like our Head Start workers. You could see different things. And even more so now I can see it in 1199, because we also have nursing home, and hospital and so forth. And for professional people, they've worked with men and women. The education really does make life less threatening to them, than for people who may not have as much education and feel so vulnerable. There are self-esteem issues, I think, sometimes, too, when you don't have as much income and you think, "This is the only job that I can have. If I lose this job, I'm in horrible trouble." Whereas I think professional people, even though, again, these days, may feel different, I think a professional person always feels like, "I have an education, I can go and find a job elsewhere." I think that's changed a little more now than it did in the past, but... And in a university setting, they're all independent thinkers. (laughs) So you've got all of these different people coming from this, this, and that. So a 925 can find a way to reach out to a Cleveland State, that we have about 375 people there. But you probably have 150 different job classifications there, because it's so many unique professionals.

Clerical as well as technical?

We're not the clerical. We are the professional staff, the people that are not clerical, or not faculty, or not maintenance-technical. They are all the people in between. They're the people who are the counselors, the advisors, the piano tuners, the research assistants, the people that do the labs, just so many different professions. So you've got all of this going on, competing with each other, and to try to convince them that you as professionals need protection, particularly here in Ohio where higher education has been under attack for years. They were always the last to have their needs addressed at Cleveland State, because they didn't have a union. So, I think that 925 had room for all of them.

Were you involved in organizing that group?

Not so much the organizing drive. There were a couple of parts that we were involved in towards the end. I became involved just prior to the election, and then afterwards. Because it was going to be my chapter then to take over and do their contract and stuff like that. And Anne was going to help me with that a little bit too. So I didn't organize them. We had a young lady who'd graduated from Oberlin, Avril Smith. And Avril was just terrific. And could go in, and organize these places, and talk to people, and just had a way about her... Avril actually went on to—I don't know if she's still working for the international. I know she did, on and off. So she may still be with them or not. But she was our organizer during the point where I was working with the union that we'd organized a lot more people.

We just had a really good flow going on at that time. Things were going well for the union, when we organized them. At that point we also started organizing the Head Starts. If anyone needs people to represent them, it's people like Head Start agencies,

where you have people that just need so much and perform such a critical service and yet are—I won't say the least looked after, but definitely could use collective bargaining, and yet a very challenging group, because there's so much turnover in that group too.

Did 925 try to deal with ethnic and racial diversity in its trainings, either for union leadership or for staff members? What kind of issues would come up around that here in Cleveland?

I think there was always a trying to be conscious of who your members were, and trying to ensure that the leaders reflected who your members were, in a diverse area. And of course we are all over the place: we're in urban areas, and we're out—way out. So that in some areas you see no diversity at all. And sometimes we did have struggles, I think, and sometimes who would go represent which areas. Carol is a black woman and I'm a white woman, and Anne's a white woman. And in some of these places, you'll rarely see a black man or woman working at these places, and in some cases, some of these places were a little distant in their—or behind—in what we thought should be their diversity knowledge and experience. So sometimes Carol and I would have our discussions with each other: "Well, why am I going here, why am I going there." Or "It shouldn't make any difference who goes where, and it shouldn't make any difference to the members. The members need to see this is who we are. And we need to accept that." So I think, in theory, we always thought we liked to do that, but in actuality it didn't always necessarily happen that way. And we had to try to work through those issues when they did happen. I think, too, I came from a more sheltered life style too. I mean, there was diversity in Euclid, certainly in the schools, and we'd had diversity training as school staff also, and in the library, and so forth. But when we get into the political agenda of the union, and the politics takes you anywhere and everywhere, so it was learning...Carol took me under her wing again, to try—you can't give someone street smarts, but to try to educate... I don't know that she realizes that. Carol is a mentor for me too, she really is. And I look to her for a lot of guidance, and friendship. So I think, it wasn't a perfect world, and we struggled, I think as others struggled. But I think as the union, we also wanted our membership to be a membership that accepts diversity. And diversity not only in race and ethnicity and sexual orientation and everything. Because in the industries that we represent, you've got it all. You've got it all there, so we need to be as open-minded as we can. And I think we as the union leadership—well, 925 was much better in retrospect than I see some places, even to this day. But I think 925 really tried to make that a goal of what it wanted to accomplish.

But I think, going back to the women part of it, though, that women could find...There are many women, single women, women that have really had hard lives imposed upon them by the society. And there were women that were part of the feminist movement, very active in the feminist movement and so forth, that wanted to have that and to not be hassled because they were standing up for themselves. And 925, I know, in learning history of 925, had that struggle in just getting established as District 925. To find its own identity, and to find a union where they felt they could at least be somewhat accepted to help grow that identity. John Sweeney at that point gave 925 the opportunity to do that. And it wasn't without its struggles also, but, from my understanding from

Anne and Debbie and Karen, SEIU was the union where we could maybe find a place. And there weren't too many others probably that we could, and be where we are today, and doing what we're doing, or at least where we were at the time.

So when 925 made decisions to try to address the needs of the union movement, and SEIU, and talking about mergers, it was very, very hard here in Ohio. Very, very hard. I'm glad there's still a Local 925. That it would have totally disappeared, I think that would have just been totally intolerable. So it's good that it's still out in Seattle, and growing and strong. And I actually have not kept up on it, like I'd like to. I see little blurbs about it every once in a while.

I think we've brought a lot to District 1199, that I think just every union movement needs.

How big is the District?

Right now, at this point, we're 27,000 members. We're in Ohio, West Virginia, and Kentucky. I think we merged with them into one, and they had about 12,000? And just since then, there have been other mergers plus new organizing. You know, the members voted to do this because it was the right thing to do. We needed to gain strength here in Ohio. And political strength and so forth. But I think there's a part of us that still mourns. It was like someone died, almost. You really had to mourn the loss of 925. It was still there, but it was gone. At the same time, it was gone. And the expectations are just going to naturally be different, in 1199, than they were at 925, just because of the whole culture that we grew up in. So I've always been one, since we've merged, to bring up cultural differences, with 1199. I think they had a hard time, sometimes, understanding, and of course they were, at the merger time, like...you know, libraries and librarians have such an image, which is a very false image, of here's who they are—a stereotype, which is not the case at all. They didn't know what to expect. And I think they've been very pleasantly surprised. But I also know that our members are members that speak up, have always been encouraged to speak up and to say what they think and to participate. But it was hard. It was very hard.

Is this office the center of the entire District? Is the president here?

No, the president is down in Columbus. The headquarters is really down in Columbus. The Cincinnati office at one point actually did close, although we had people working down there. And now, because of organizing and so forth, there is a small office down there. We have people that we represent down there, too. And then Cleveland, there's 1199 as well as District 925, a lot of people up in this area too. And then Toledo, there's an office; Youngstown. They've grown too, since we've merged, and so forth. And then in West Virginia, Kentucky, they were already there. But we just try to keep our identity in different ways. I think we at least keep the essence of who we were, definitely as a part of 1199, and I think has changed 1199. It couldn't help but change it, because we were who we were, and they were who they were, and you just can't hope to go where

you need to go and do what you need to do as a union without finding ways to absorb each other's culture. So that's kind of what we did there, I think.

Is it a process that's still going on?

Oh, yes.

Because it's only been about three years, right?

It's been four years, actually. A fast four years, I'll tell you. Actually, because we've had a couple of other unions merge with us, and new organizing, the union has actually gone through a whole process of creating a vision, a ten-year vision, and new leadership development, and trying to adopt or adapt, whatever, to absorbing the cultures and deciding where do we want to go from here. So, it's taken a lot. It's taken this much time to get there, but especially in the last year or so, we've really been working on, "Ok, where do we need to go in this union moment, as District 1199 today and who we are. And where we need to go. And as SEIU." So, yeah, it's been interesting. It's been very interesting.

How would you describe the legacy of 925?

The legacy of 925. I think it was the union that sought to bring out the best in people and help them understand that the power of working together can make life better for all of us, to educate us as much as we can, even if that education comes from just even being a part of a union at your shop. To open our eyes to politics. I mean, women have always had to struggle in politics. And I think it's been one of the most reluctant areas that our members have wanted to be a part of. And yet, it certainly rules just about everything that we do. So I think it was there to help open our eyes to the political process, and trying to be a part of that political process and to not ignore that political process because it does impact you and your day-to-day life back here of how you work, how much you're paid, what kind of benefits you can have; what you're going to have for your children and your grandchildren.

And we're there to help you grow if you want to grow. We offer that out to anybody and everybody that that wants to do that. I've met many wonderful men and women. I think for men, it's to have a more comfort level with women, and women with men, that we learn to deal with each other as equals. And I love it. I love it when I tell them, "You're an equal with your boss, sitting across from the table with him, no matter what you're doing. You can yell at that man. If he's looking at you nasty, you can yell back at that man, and there's not a thing [he] can do about it, and he chews you out, you can give it right back to him, or you can get up and leave, and just say, `I'm not going to sit here and take this anymore.'" And it empowers them to do that.

I love it. One of my comments early on, when I went to the table and management—I could tell, it would really get under their skin, was, "Well you know, indirectly now, we're a part of your management team. Because we're here to discuss how you're going

to treat this whole group of employees that you have." And they would just hate that. They would hate that comparison. And it may or may not be totally accurate. But they can't do anything, essentially, unless they talk with us about certain things. And oh, they used to hate that. And I used to love it and the members used to love that too. And to show them, I'm not a person that does a lot of yelling across the table and stuff—my manner's a lot different, from what people think unions are--Jimmy Hoffa and the Teamsters. Which you always hear. But people know when I'm upset. I just feed off of the strength I get from the members, because they're there to root for me, and if they feel, if management's attacking me at the table, they're just about ready to physically get up and get...and I'm just glad to see that they can realize we don't have to do this. And to help them understand, you don't have to take this. And you've got power. So I think empowering people, because that's what they did for me, they empowered me and enabled me to change who I was and what I wanted to do with my life.

There are times I regret not being that paralegal. I wish I'd had more time to go to school, and probably if I'd made that time—well, I don't know if I could have or not, I guess I was satisfied enough doing this. And times that I'm of course frustrated, because you can't do everything you want to do. And I get frustrated with the union, too, because, you know, I don't have time for anything else at certain times and stuff.

But I think the legacy is to leave men and women better off in their workplaces and being able to create a better life for working people here, in this country. Because they're getting beat up really bad. Especially right now. I'm just horrified with where things could be going. And working in this profession, I just know that people have all of this in them, in this country, if we could just tap into it and find a way to use it. I guess that's what unionizing is: tapping into that part of people to say, "You're frustrated, and we know you don't want to do this anymore. And it could be better. And we want to show you how to do it. And you can do it." And I just wish that people could do that. But I know that there's a lot of things stacked against us, too, it's just very frustrating to see that. So that's part of the legacy that makes me feel that way, that somehow maybe, someday, we can tap into that. Maybe I don't always work as hard enough on that political end of things, either. And maybe if I wasn't tired at times, or had more time, and wanted a little more time with the family, I'd jump into it more.

By the political end you mean electoral politics?

Electoral politics, yes, or helping leaders get into politics and stuff like that, because I think there's a lot to be done there. But I think I'm only one person, so I'm guarding my little piece, and trying to empower other people and help other people learn how to do that.

Do you feel optimistic about the work you're doing now? What does keep you going? You mentioned sometimes you feel some frustration. What keeps you going?

Ultimately, again, it's our members, many of who are friends, some acquaintances, some friends, some good friends and so forth. They keep me going, because I know that they count on me, and I count on them. They know that I count on them, and they're always there to reinforce me. So I think that as long as I can do it without feeling totally overwhelmed or just totally negative and whatever, I'll continue to try to do that. But it's a very physically and mentally challenging job. And there is burnout. And even as a leader, there was burnout. There were so many times when you did things, and people didn't want to help you and stuff. But I think that's when you get back together with larger groups of people and see the union as a whole. So many times, you just see your piece of the union. As a member, so many times your only experience is with other members and in your own chapter. And you're so self-focused. As a leader in a chapter, then you can go to the larger things, where you go to trainings, or if you have executive board meetings or something, you'll meet others and then you can share and help get that burden off of you and hear what they're doing. You hear, "Oh, well, that's happening to me, too." So you know that it's not unusual what's happening to you.

One thing that I think is regretful is not having as many international trainings as they used to have. That was another place for union leaders to go, and meet more union leaders from all over, from different places, and see the bigger picture and be a part of the bigger picture and get the energy from it. Because if you were tired when you went to one of those places, and you might get worked to death, but you've gotten so...I would get so jazzed up just talking to other people, and hearing their experiences, and being amazed that, "Oh, you represent these people," and so forth. It was just a renewal process to do that. It doesn't seem there's as much opportunity to do that, or we need to find different ways to do that now. So maybe that's where politics come in more. People that you can bring in to see what's going on in the larger picture.

Or now the 1199 executive board is over 300 people. Because every chapter has a representative. We didn't have that luxury in District 925. But every chapter has at least one member. And they are called together at this point four times a year. And it helps you appreciate...you always think that, "Oh, we have it so crummy here," and "Oh, we're just so downtrodden and so forth," in my job. And yet it doesn't take very much to go and look to someone else who's a brother or sister in our union to see, "Oh my gosh, and I thought I had it bad." And it helps you appreciate it more. Not that your problems are any less, or don't deserve the attention that we want to give them. But it just gives you a greater appreciation for the movement, and why the movement is so important. And having that movement threatened like we are, it's why we're struggling like we are, because that has broken down. So that's hard, that those opportunities aren't there. And I think we at 1199 are trying to find ways to bring people together. And I know 925 tried to do that, too, to bring people together, and it was exciting to do that.

You mean, as a union, bring people together.

Together as a union, whether it's during a struggle or—good times and tough times. I remember an experience—you'd asked about if there was something that happened that really was impressionable for me. It was actually when I was working for District 925 as

an administrative organizer. I was representing the Cleveland Public Library. And we had a really tough negotiations. It's a challenging workplace. This is one of the most venerable institutions, old—it reminds me of an old money institution type thing, and it's very set in its ways. It sets the standard, actually, for benefits and wages in Ohio, and has for quite some time. So this was my library—

You mean for all public employees?

For public libraries. Everyone aspires, especially the unionized libraries, aspires to us. And I think because of our unionization, we've also improved non-union libraries elsewhere in Ohio. But we'd had a really awful negotiations. We had a wage step scale, and a very good contract there. And the library had done a job classification study that was just disastrous. They had proposed eliminating the wage step scale, demoting all these positions and everything. And we got ready for battle. And if there is anything that Anne Hill is wonderful at, it's battle. Oh, my goodness. She knows how to help us pull together a battle. And this was my really first big battle. I'd had a couple others, too, but this one really required some very unique things. It was watching the work at the table, and away from the table with the bargaining unit. Politically, where we could get our friends here in Cleveland, politics-wise, is through Jobs with Justice, which we had a very active organization here. And actually, then, our national union, even though we were in different parts of the country, became involved in this one. Because it was all coming to a head. We decided to do informational picketing. They had just rebuilt a new building. The Cleveland Public Library downtown has two buildings. They'd demolished one and totally created a new building, and had just opened it. It had been a several-year process. People had worked their buns off, and sacrificed so much, and put up with so much, and worked hard to get the building open, and they had a grand re-opening, and stuff like that. So we were delayed in the re-opening of the contract while they were finishing this disastrous job classification study, and then they go to the table with these awful proposals...We'd had a lot of interesting activities leading up to it. But we were having this informational picketing. It was also the weekend that District 925 was having its executive board meeting in Cleveland. So we set this picketing up for a Saturday in front of this new building, and we were going to have all of the delegates that were in from 925. So there were probably, I don't know, about 100 people at that point in time in 925 that were like the leadership being part of this. And then we had members--the building was still open, people were working. We'd called our friends from Jobs With Justice so there were different community groups coming in, different unions coming in and everything. Linda Chavez Thompson was speaking at our convention.

So come Saturday morning about 11:30, we were over at the—it was the Boncore(sp?) Hotel at that time—just a couple blocks from the library. It was pouring rain that day. Absolutely pouring rain. We had raincoats, but we all got garbage bags, these clear plastic garbage bags, to cover ourselves with, and umbrellas. We did our signs, put plastic things over our signs, and made our way over there. So we probably had 250, 300 people there in front, starting our little thing. And fortunately, it was a dead news day in Cleveland, because if anything else was going, they avoid like a plague doing anything for the unions. But of course it was raining. Poor people out there in the rain looking

very miserable. And we actually really did have a lot of good things on our side for what we were proposing, because of everything that had gone on, and what the library was proposing was totally—it was criminal that they even proposed such a thing. So we started, we did our chants, we were doing our picketing back and forth, and so forth, and the library started—I can't remember if they were videotaping us or not at that point. And Linda Chavez Thompson got up on window wells, right outside the library, to speak over everybody. And Donna Bellis was our chapter president at that time, and she got up to speak, and a couple other people.

And then we decided, we were going to go <u>in</u> the building. I mean, we've never done this before. Here's this <u>new</u> building, ok. They get a 10-day notice that we're going to do this picketing, but there were no major supervisors or whatever in that building. So this is an employer that probably has, what, 700, 800 employees, right? So none of the administration were there that day, except I think the PR guy, and whoever the managers were on duty in the different departments. So we just said, oh, we're going to go in there! And we had our chants going and everything. And we started going around, and then we just went right into the library. And it's ten stories. And it's this marble building on the outside, but very modern on the inside. And when you go into the lobby area, there's the circ desk area here, and it opens up in a certain area down to the lower level, which is where they have their auditorium and their AV area. And so there's an echo. The place really echoes very badly. So you hear things and they just echo. What we decided to do, was we broke the people up into—you couldn't get to the tenth floor, that was the administrative floor. But you could get on the other floors. We broke people up into seven different groups. And each group—and then they had a couple elevators, but they also had this stairwell, which is a fireproof safety stairwell now, that you go in there, and you can hear people bounding up and down the stairs. So sure enough, we had our little troops march in, and one group went downstairs, and one stayed right in the lobby—

END of SIDE 1 of TAPE 2
START of SIDE 2 of TAPE 2

There were a couple of security guards, but that was it. As we went in there, the cameras followed us in, and were shooting things, and then, just as soon as we came in, we left—everyone kind of marched down, and went back out, and went in front of the library, and then we went back over to the hotel, and that was it. And it was wonderful. It was just absolutely the most fantastic thing. Because I hadn't had to do that, and it was a unique opportunity because you usually don't go into buildings. And they didn't do anything about it. Of course the attorneys were outraged, and got restraining orders--

So tell me what was the culmination of your march in the library?

The culmination that when we went back to the table, we definitely had made an impression. We caught a good news day, we were on all the media, we'd gotten good papers, television, and so forth. And it was really out in the community then. We'd been trying to get to the community, but it was really out. And we definitely had political support, because Anne had worked that so well. Of course, the attorney got restraining

orders on us in case we wanted to do any more, and so forth. And we had to take strike votes and so forth. But when we went to respond to the restraining orders, I had gone to the table that day, and Anne had gone with one of our members of the team to the judge's quarters. Well, the judge basically reamed out the attorneys for wanting the restraining orders and everything, and saying, "Why are you taking so long? Take care of these people and do what you need to do!" So it didn't totally get it done at that point, and we still had to do more stuff—

Meaning pressure, to get—?

More pressure. And we had to take our strike vote and everything. But it definitely was a turning point in our favor, to do that positive public—we thought it was good for the members, too, to just do that. And then actually in our very last session that we did—I'd heard about this attorney, that when he finished up, he liked to go to like 2 or 3 in the morning. He just had his own little way of doing things. Oh, he liked to go to 2 or 3 in the morning, and I just said, "Well, we'll just do what we need to do."

And we started on a Friday morning. And we knew. We knew we had to get this done. If we weren't going to get it done, we were going to have to figure out a strike. We started it like at 8 o'clock, 9 o'clock on a Friday morning. Well, we went into the night, and into the night, our members of our team had brought like sleeping bags, and toys and things, to keep us going, and we just aggravated them so much. We ended up going until 2 o'clock—1 o'clock, 2 o'clock that Saturday afternoon. We outlasted them. We got what we needed to get. We held out for like six hours for like six people—because again, this system was just so bad—and found a compromise that we could live with. And so, I think that 925 has always been very creative. There's lots of stories like that. But for me, that's one of my most memorable stories.

Actually with 1199, last year, we went out on strike. It was the first strike. We took a one-day strike, and 95% of our members went out that day, and honored the picket line.

And where was that?

At Cleveland Public—same place, because we continued to have—depending upon who the administrators are. With 925, we always try to have fun with what we were doing. You could make it fun. It was serious, and yet you'd make it fun. And I think that aggravated management most of all, that we could sit there and laugh and still have a good time, and outlast them. And that's it, because, you know, people can do it. People have it in them, if they're willing to go that extra mile. It's a lot harder, and a lot more threatening, today, than it even was back in the '90s, I think it was '97, because of jobs and library and money being tight with money everywhere, and so many people looking for jobs. But if people just hang in there, and trust leaders. They've learned to trust. I mean, they really have to learn to trust their leaders, and me as their negotiator, when we ask them to do these things, because this is what we need to do. And when they respond, and see that it does work—sometimes it may not work, but we're trying to help them as

much as possible to get there. But 925 was always just—and had a great coalition of unions, labor, religion, community groups and so forth. It was very supportive.

Do you think that's part of its legacy, that it organized—do other unions, to your knowledge, organize those coalitions, and do those public actions?

I think so. I think 925 was very willing to do that. I know sometimes unions aren't as willing to do that, and it makes all the difference in the world. The Cleveland AFL-CIO had been in trouble for a long time, almost negligible in the earlier years when I had been a member and then started working for the union. I can't remember the exact year, but at that point in time, there was a group of union leaders here in greater Cleveland area that said, and the young blood—the new blood—I won't say it was just young, it was new blood—said, we need to change. Unions need to change. In much the same way that the struggle with the AFL-CIO in the national level. And those leaders said, "We're going to change this or else unions will die here in Cleveland." And they did, and 925 was part of that group that went in there, and—

What were some of the changes? Can you describe the changes?

Organizing was not necessarily real high on the level I think that—you know, there's this song. There's always the struggle in unions of servicing versus organizing/politics. And SEIU had determined, you need to be mindful of servicing, but we've got to do organizing or we're going to die. And the politics, we had to do that. And 925 took that on wholeheartedly, and here in Cleveland, I guess I don't remember as much all of the intricacies of that. But I do know that servicing was probably the standard, it was a lot of people that had been here for a long time and were not, you know, "We need to change and be active and be involved, and we should be inserting ourselves in anything that's happening in political processes here in Cleveland." And I guess I can't say that I know so much what wasn't happening versus what I see happens now. That the AFL-CIO and John Ryan as its executive director--we supported putting him into that position--is a force to be reckoned with politically on behalf of the unions, here in Cleveland. He's on the commission that's studying whether to build a new convention center. He has the ear of all of the politicians, not probably just locally, but regionally, state-wide. He's a very powerful man with a lot of influence, thanks to the backing of his unions and so forth. And so he inserts himself in anything that has to do with improving working lives here for people in Ohio: the minimum wage law in Cleveland that passed, and trying to build that up. There's just been battles over the years. Saving these hospitals that they've wanted to close and so forth. And SEIU was involved in those, and Local 47, another of our counterparts that eventually merged with us. We worked with them very closely. We always welcomed participation of other—asked other people to help, and realized that it was also our responsibility to help others. That was always very important. And I think that's another part of the legacy of 925. And 925 was always trying to organize. And SEIU was always trying to organize. And that was a little unusual for some of the more senior unions here in this area, especially in this area of the country where there was such a strong union density before.

That seems like a good place to stop, Peggy.

Ok.

The more global picture.

END OF INTERVIEW.