

Interview with Greg Szurmcki

F.V.: Tell me your name and...

G.S.: My name is Greg Szurmcki and I am a resident of Kings Park and a former employee of the Kings Park psychiatric center. When you ask me the history of CSEA and how it evolved. I have to say that its ... part of the tri-ad of things that occurred in the course of the history of both the town, mental health CSEA and other aspects of Long Island's growth, including the region. When I first went to work it was 1955, January 17th in the Kings Park psychiatric center. It was there I had 85 patients alone on the ward in the afternoon. And then when the man called in sick on ward 65 I had 170. And then I would have to take them outside and feed in a mess hall of 1,000 patients at the same time. From this was one of my first injuries which eventually came to 17 injuries. But I was appalled more at the aspect of having 85 patients, watching the cold detail of patients coming back looked like Dachau. I remember I landed E+3 and ended out of Berlin and that was the end of the war for me and I remembered seeing all of this and it reminded me so much of inhumanity. Not that I'm a do-gooder or a bleeding heart, it wasn't that. It was that coming back and watching the way they were treated and the modality which was the state of the art was frightening. So, my first engagement with the director was that I was afraid when they came back because they used to make cigarettes with Cayuga tobacco and had big toilet paper cigarettes. And you could put your finger into the institutional wood and it would drive right up to your knuckles. So I was fearful because the sleeping quarters were on the top and I says, "My God, what am I going to do if it goes on fire, because you'd never get down the stairs." So I broke my key. The next day the director called me down and says, "Gregory, you'd better get some kind of representation or join one of these unions or I'm going to have to fire you." And we can negotiate that. He was a beautiful man. Then one thing... it was the farmers coming back. I made the shower and had to clean them and all that to bring them back. And at the same time, the chief of supervising nurse was head of CSFA. So you couldn't go to your boss really and ask him to take a grievance on and help you out, okay? Though Mike Shin, my supervisor, was a good man. We went to college together. But then I thought, what the hell can we do? We can't go on like this. So what I did was, Al Worth came. If you remember Al Worth was Jerry Worth's brother. And we started the local 1494. This was back in 1958. It was Brooks and there was a f rat man named Drake who was a licensed practicing nurse. And we began our first, what you would call a union. And unfortunately, it went for a year and we started to have the first labor management meetings which was a wonderful thing to have no representation and then to have a voice with a director who listens. So this was our first thing. You get ... you get bitten by this bug. This is the first ... when you begin to feel it. 1942 I was part of the AFLCIO. But that was another story. But this was something different altogether. No representation was under it or where the hell do you voice anything? Both for the patients, for the employees and for the town itself. I knew instinctively, if we could better the lot of the employees we would better the light of the patients. So both together we could go together. But it needed an organizational way to do that. So, there were some unhappy involvements with Al Worth and the man that he wanted to make president was a beautiful Irish kid. And he was getting on the police force and some words were written and letters were written because they wanted to keep him in the union and, of course, that broke it up. And then I became business agent for the local 237 and Mrs. _____ from Pilgrim State and together we did our thing for a year until several meetings by the Brooklyn Bridge and local 237 and I says, "This is not the democratic organization we want." Number one, it was far removed and not close enough. Then, finally,

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Ned Zumo took over from Nathan Hale, not Nathan Hale the ... traitor but really he took CSEA over and started to make the first birth pains of a union.

F.V.: Now, who was this?

G.S.: Ned Zumo was our field man, okay? Later to be our field man. And there we began CSFA and began its faltering steps toward becoming a union. And then Joe Aiello took over because Ned Zumo went over to Northeast Nassau Psychiatric Center which was one of those small hospitals because the modality of treatment was, then was to make smaller hospitals, use catch man areas where people had become ill and then to return it back. So, now you picture that kind of treatment to what it was when I first started was 22 patients would get shock treatment at one time. That's a horrible, horrible thing, okay? Insulin shock. You kept people in the jackets for almost three years at a time only to eat and get treated. We had a vegetable ward where you kept them nude and washed them down. You know, this was... this was inhuman. And it was the state of the art. That was the tragic part of it. The Willow Book consent degree was the first one that gave us the ratio of III and we used that as a union. And from that time on we got in 1971, we did the medical hygiene agreement. And we got those things in plus seniority and a few of the other things that are going into it. So that was breaking of the ice. And April 1, 1973 we went on strike. We were the most militant arm of CSEA. We were somewhere near 40,000 strong throughout the street. On the island here you had three institutions with a total of 35,000 patients. Very strong. The only job in town, and it was a very militant group. Irving Flannenbaum, meanwhile, taking his ten cents from each of the county people started CSEA over there. And, very effective, very good man. I don't care what the story you might say to him. He made CSEA in the region. Him and Sol Bendette at the board of directors meeting used to be unbelievable. Both vying but yet both joining when it was necessary north and the south, something we fought continually.

F.V.: Your own civil war?

G.S.: Well, not so much that, but you guys are rich down there. We're poor up here. What you get as a salary down there is way above what we're getting because you've got a geographic stipend to help you with that. Never knowing that the cause of it is...Never wanting to realize it. Okay? But anyway, we had our first strike. I got tossed 50 feet. Joe Aiello was president then and we were trying to tell the people, "Look this is the main, this is where we get the media, we get the coverage. Go down on the side to another place and go in there if you want to be a scab. Okay? We are not going to hurt you." Nice old couple. Jammed on the thing and I grabbed onto the awning because I didn't want to go into the car. Dragged me 50 feet and, of course, it took me a week to get back in shape. But that was the first experience that that, "Hey, this is no games anymore and even nice people can be ugly people when it comes to a strike." The nurses, of course, most of them stayed on duty. This is our profession and this is our oath, and so on and so on, which we didn't appreciate. The next time we were contemplating a strike was a whole different ball game. It was later on in 1977. But anyway, after that we established ourselves as a union. We had regular labor management meetings. I took over for Joe Aiello and the director and I became very bitter friends. Because he wanted to hurt someone very badly. He was a young nurse and because the nurse was not giving him what he wanted anymore, because he had a psychiatric practice out in South Hampton, he wanted him fired and he had rigged up a thing to fire him. So, I refused and he had said to me, "Well, you know, one hand washes the other, you know. So someday

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you're going to come to me for something." And I says, "No. Not a young man's life." Fortunately, that man turned out to be a high official in the veteran's area for the government. So, those were the things which kept you going. McGowan was good to me. He allowed me to go to court every time I had a thing I couldn't solve with local it went to court and we'd set precedents. But then he moved a whole section of the children's group out where my last tour of duty was to get rid of me. So, I went to my wife and I says, "Marge, we've got two kids and you're working. If I leave, the union is dead here at Kings Park. And we'd put so much time in it and so much effort and it was growing. It was close to retirement. So if I take an early retirement would that be all right with you?" And she said, "Go." So I took my early retirement and I operated out of the trunk of my car. And at that time you could be a president at that time. And when you look back, it was classical and as tragic as it was, I enjoyed it. You know, it was ... its unionism. And its doing is an advocate for people that makes you go on. Always had that. Must have it if you give up your job. But anyway, things turned out in a different matter. My lawyer gave me half his office, which was right outside the entrance. And there we conducted for a year and a half and the director went crazy and tried to prevent the people from coming back and forth. It was real classical fight. He was having his car and his kid's care painted in the paint shop and Joe Sheridan who has the Yacht club now would sit there eating his lunch and we had a camera in the lunch box and when they opened the door he took pictures of it and I brought him up on charges. So, it was ... it was this kind of thing, right. But then Flannenbaum and McGowan says, "Look, we've got to get you back to work because we're going to do away with retirees holding active office." So Maya Futia said, "I'll put you anywhere you want to be but I can't put you back there because he's the oldest director in the system and they'll all come down on us." And I says, "That's not good enough. It means that we lose all the sacrifices we made so far." Joe Lavelle, God bless him. He was the Long Island Developmental Center. I said, "Joe, you've got an MR union on you. Would you turn it over to our local? If you do that, I can apply for a job with LIDC and I'll be back on the roles again. And we've got these bastards beat." And Joe is a wonderful guy. He took me clown to Coughlin who was then the OMRDD and then he became prison director/commissioner. And we had conversation and he found out what my circumstances were. He went back to an office, came back and he says, "Okay, you've got till September." And I says, "Mr. Coughlin, I appreciate what you're doing, but September is too short. He'll beat me." So he went back in the office and he extended it another year. So the following year. And I came back and, I had to come back as a motor vehicle operator, and I was a of three, you know, I was up there with pay and a lot of service. I didn't care. I came back and I said to my operations chief engineer, I says, "I'm your new driver." And he says, "Get the hell out of here." He says, "I don't want to see you. You're a troublemaker!" So I had carte blanche and that operated fully as a union and we busted his living kneecaps, okay. God, what a time we had with him because he couldn't hurt me anymore. And that's the way it began. And then finally, we lost the nurses of PS&T. I remember Marvin Baxley with the CSEA leader, if you remember, crying. We were all ... because they were counting the voted. And it was sort of a piece, a quarter of our membership went away and that was hard to take. There's lots of room to blame in the right places but, you know, that's under the bridge. Then the next biggest step was that we would...

M.M.: Okay, losing the nurses.

F.V.: Oh yeah, what was the story behind that?

M.M.: The loss of the nurses, of course, was one of the first real blows to CSEA and that was one quarter of their membership. Now, who do we attribute this to? Was it our good friends, the councils? All right? How much they mix in and how much they didn't mix in. They were still allied, in my estimation, with the government, Okay? I mean, that's where their bread and butter was. Albany. And this was, you know, we dumped one that Wentzel had under and we got Jack Rice because Jim and Featherstonhaugh came in and put them out of the way and they took over. And they were very strong in the union. Very influential. Okay? And I think, in a way that sometimes they thought that they were responsible for the whole union. All right? Trying to put it nicely. Because he did do good work. But you know, there always comes a time when there's difference of philosophy and that came once with Wentzel in Chancellor Hall when we were contemplating the second strike and he wasn't for it at all and then I remember the guy from Regent's getting up and endorsing McGowan. And then there was an election and McGowan won. But it was a chad kind of a ballot. And I remember Kenny coming from Rita Wallace's local and saying, "Greg, I want to review the balance." And I says, "Fine, Kenny. But these God-damned things, as soon as you pick them up, well then things are going to fall out." So he gave up. Side story: Jimmy Gripper from Brooklyn who was a real ball-buster at that time. But in a union way. He was ... a lot of times he was right. And he tried to get into the Amsterdam balloting place where they were conducting the election and where the ballots were in the evening, claiming he was someone else. And of course, they knew who he was and they stopped him. But from that election, no matter how you say it was, McGowan won. And going on just from that balloting, we swore it would never happen again, because I was on the election committee. It had just been appointed. Bernie Schmoll and Genevieve Clark, and then I became chairman. So with Bob Stack we said, "We've got to stop it." This is ... we're in the middle of the Empire Plaza Convention Center and we're counting ballots from morning till night and we're subject to the flaws and the idiosyncrasies of those who are counting it. Okay? You can't count for twelve hours and not be tired, all right? So things could occur there and everybody was up there in the audience looking at every move you made and it was just a tiresome, cumbersome thing that was not really the validation you wanted. So getting that Bob Stack said "Let's go see if we can get a computer." Voting. Okay? So we approached a couple of local firms and of course that didn't work out. They were too much. The American Arbitration Society was doing the same thing we were doing, counting lay hand. Then we got tied up with the Independent Election Corporation who was in New Hyde Park. And they did all of the stock broking elections. So we said, "Great." So we went and met with them and they put us through the whole process, showing us everything they do. And they were bragging about the OCR readings, which is very unbelievable. They slit, they took out the envelope, they ran it underneath the computer imaging thing and it rejected or accepted. Okay. The count was going on and you would have it by six o'clock that night with no trouble. So we developed a system which was called the three envelope system. It was a mail-out with your number and name on it. Within it was a return envelope with your ID number on it and your name. And contained within that ballot was a secret ballot envelope. So the lay department said, "Hey, hold on. This can be manipulated in any way you want." That was their thought. So for three months, they followed us step-by-step. All the way through. And then they endorsed it. And I think today, you still have it. All right? And then I used to teach that all though the area and we used to have hearings and all the things that went with it. But it was so simple. You know the mail returns would come in. There was a cage that you could observe any of the candidates. And they would slit open that return envelope, put that aside and had to be accounted for but they never could be mixed up with the ballots in any way or identified. And that became a system which was time-saving, less costly and less subject to error. Right? Could it be manipulated? I guess if you

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had all the principals in you could. All right. I mean it's to foolishly think that nothing can be arranged in one way or another. But it was the most democratic way I know. And when I stood up in front of the board of directors and sold them that and made a whole presentation on it they adopted it. Thanks to Marge and myself we co-authored the first election manual for active membership and then for the retirees. So that was a great ... so that was what senses of accomplishment that you left behind and a legacy that ensured perhaps that the democratic process within a union doesn't deteriorate into a teamster-type of local, you know where you spoke only when you were told to speak and that's what got me out of 237. "Hey fella, you speak when we tell you to speak." And I says, "Oh, that's not for us." But anyway. That was part of that procedure. Now, the nurses again. Big hole. Now we were subject to article 20 now. In a way that if ... because Gotbaum and MacAntee and McGowan were all playing an internal game in there and Gotbaum never forgave them for that. And from that in a Polish hall in Albany we met together and McGowan and all of us endorsed merging with AFSCME. Which was brilliant, it gave us not only a national status. It gave us two vice presidents. And it gave us 400,000 members in the state of New York. With a very powerful lobby. So that was one of the brilliant things that McGowan did. But Jim Roemer and Featherstonhaugh, of course, there was beginning to be a rift drifting between both of them. Okay? McGowan, of course, really never trusted lawyers. In fact, he trusted very few people that weren't unionists. And from then on the rift broke and then it became that side and this side. And we chose McGowan which I paid for later. And, anyway, the outcome was is that finally they got their own in-house lawyers and they did away with the firm who got to be the largest law firm in Albany, incidentally. And just lately they settled a major lawsuit because with the power plant that I'm supporting now and trying to get in Kings Park, not in the center but in the town, there was a woman who had told me that she knew Featherstonhaugh and started to talk and she says, "They've made a settlement but I don't know how much the settlement was. It's a big secret." So we know that they went, fade into the years into another area and CSEA, of course, went on its own way. McGowan, unfortunately, died. McDermott took over and McDermott was very vindictive. If you weren't with him in the beginning, you were against him. And all those things reflected in many ways.

F.V.: Is that what you were talking about when you said you paid for it later?

G.S.: Yeah, but ... but many things reflected that. It's part of the politics of a union: You're either with me or against me, okay? And it's unfortunate, but it happens. But you were used to that. It never bothered you. And anyway, I came with Kwep and we went on. Jack Carey was one of the former heads of the field men. A very good man. Except that he had a problem and that problem manifested, in a way that he fell, down the stairs, and really injured himself and later on died. But he was one of those volatile characters like Bob Gile. There's always that core group who build unions. And one was Bob Gile, Flannenbaum, Solomon Bendette, McGowan. And these were real staples. Real strengths of the core of the union that brought it this far, so then we lost the leader, of course, as you know, shortly after- the nurses left. And Marvin Baxley was a nice young man. I remember being at the board of directors when the vote came up to either put in and the Public Secto--, which the union wanted and drop CSEA Leader. And Sid Grossman, who the CS Leader had angered regarding one of his photographs in that, had the deciding vote. And the vote came down to Sid Grossman to vote and he said, "No." And Marvin Baxley busted out crying. It was all those years, suddenly one vote, because of things that happened before, manifested itself in destroying the Leader. Which was great because the leader always shared us with

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everybody else. You know, in New York City. This way the Public Sector became a single paper with its only issue being CSEA.

F.V.: Hold right there.

G.S.: Very briefly...

F.V.: Okay, we're rolling.

G.S.: The history that we're talking about is Wentzel to McGowan and that was really the sequence of events that made CSEA and AFSCME what it is today and made it a union. And it was that two men, one who finally gave up being an association and the other one taking the reins and making it a union. So that was the evolvement of that particular sequence of events that made us a union. Now, Mental Health also was another threshold we crossed. Prior to this, there was no treatment outside of Amytal Sodium for the patients. And then came Thorazine, which was a derivative of rauwoltia, which was originally discovered to stop continuous uncontrollable hiccups. But the problem was you had to learn how to titrate it. And it had terrible side effects until they learned how to measure it. And you used to put ... the man would be a rash from head to toe. All blue. Some white Irish kid, you know, who was gleaming white turned into just one cast of blue from head to toe. And then all rigid. Or laying and doing nothing. Okay? So, it took a year to really evolve that to where the measurement was proper for individuals and each individual. And when that happened, the people who were on the violent ward that you couldn't take out of their jacket only to feed, medicate and ease were walking down the street and saying, "Hi, Greg." When you see that transformation and that threshold crossed, and from then on the advent of more sophisticated and exotic drugs: Valium and other things like that. We got the alcoholics in and took them off the Bowery only because they wanted to clean up the city. But you couldn't legally take them as mental patients unless you gave them a psychosis. So they said, "Psychosis due to alcoholic deterioration." And there became the first drug treatment in the state of New York which is quite sophisticated now. But then after the Thorazine, the modality of the medical model, which meant that doctors were in control of all major wards, nurses were also supervisors, they said, "No. We're going to make the administrative model." So they got someone who could understand finance, who could understand the public and has other thoughts than just medical. Okay? So the medical became subordinate to the administrator. We had some wild times. But that's when it changed. And then from that it also changed more drastically with the smaller hospitals. It was an attempt to bring them back to where they belonged. And with that we started to get them placed in nursing homes. At first they didn't want patients in the nursing homes. But when they had over a 20% vacancy rate they used to go, "Send us your best, Greg, send us your best." And I used to follow them up being at community health I used to follow them up. The nursing homes emptied out 50% of the population of the mental institutions. Because the prior admission was to take your elderly and throw them in there. You had no money to take care of them so the state took care of them. Didn't matter if you were crazy or not. But if you were bedridden in any way, this is a whole horrible story in itself. In fact, when I was supervisor, I used to make sure I changed the young guys every six months. Because you become blunted. Very hard. You can't watch people die every day, five days a week. And it's hard. All kinds of diseases, all kinds of thin@s that go on. We were making three dollars an hour. The guy that was keeping the concrete warm in the building next door was making seven dollars an hour. But then it began the catchment areas. That was the first start of community

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placement of patients to put them back in the place where they originated with their problem. And it started to escalate. And today what you have out of that is you have group homes, you have all the developmental people in homes, and we have thirteen in now. Never know even they're there. Because when we used to go to fight them in the beginning, we'd go to the neighbors and we'd say, "How are they?" "In the beginning we were a little leery," he said. "But now they're the best neighbors in the world." They are fully programmed all day long. They are being properly treated instead of vegetables on the ward. Willowbrook was a horrible place. Felton King who was a cousin of Martin Luther King used to tell us of what it was there. Most of the guys were drinking alcohol. It's a horrible place to work. This is what Geraldo Rivera, if you remember, started. But it was the patients, parents and relatives who made that possible. And at Willowbrook a consent decree came out of it which helped CSEA and Mental Health enormously. And Felton King paid for his advocacy. Him and his executive board went into the personnel office and held it hostage for a while and of course they fired him and the other crew. And then we ... he was placed with TerBush and Powell, but he lost his pension. So, there's sacrifices in many ways that people made that, you know, people forget when it's gone. And it's the way it should be. Can't say, "Oh, in my war I did A, B, C and D, you know." Today is their future and it's their fight. And it's a different type of fight. So the town itself now has at 1997 in October they shut down the institution. And there was a law that was legislated that said, "Community re-investment act" that would make the town hall, once they closed it, which was pure, unadulterated crap. Typical state. And then we said ... I was on the local community task force and we felt we could put in there diversity. I headed a group of seventeen civics and environmental groups and I approached Castro in November of 1997 and we made a whole presentation and we got 153 acres of the park. So, we preserved the waterfront. And I knew if we preserved the waterfront that any developer coming in could not bargain with and use it as a chip. Say, "I'll give you access to the waterfront, but you've got to give me 1,500 housing units." So we took that little apple out of the way. So, that was another little accomplishment that we had. But now we're still in main trouble. We're going to lose a lot of direct pilot money to the schools. The power plant can give us 2 million dollars direct aid. There is opposition in for that. And we've got 450 homes being developed. So all of this comes together with great issues that had great meaning for a town that was supported for 113 years, really 114 years, by an institution called, Kings Park Psychiatric Center. So now, what were doing is trying to pick up the aftermath of that and the legislation that promised so much and gave us nothing. But, you know, that's...you're negotiating all the time whether it's union or whether it's an advocate for the citizens or not.

F.V.: Once an activist, always an activist, right?

G.S.: No, and it ... it keeps your mind alert. It keeps you going. And Rego, and all meet together at least every three months. Joe Lavelle and we keep in touch and sort of in touch with the past. Joe was fabulous. Joe Lavelle was a fabulous wheeler and dealer and negotiators. When he had the commissioner of prisons working as my representative to keep me working in the union, it was ... if you said that, nobody would believe you, you know. But then that's what occurred. So, there you have mental health that evolved from really custodial care but very ... a very brutal way of treating patients. And not that they meant to be, but there was no money. And they already spent a billion dollars on this. Everybody was throwing whatever they couldn't care for medically into the system. So, when you overload a system, don't pay the personnel and you have no program of any consequence to return them, then it fails. And what brought it

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about was the union. You know, they can say, "Well, we developed Thorazine, we..." Yes. But who was there advocating from the beginning before Thorazine? Who was advocating for the patients? Who was advocating for the employees? Because we also developed a career ladder. I do not know if you understand that. Well, I took a test two years and I became a staff attendant, which means I had charge of a ward. But that's all you were ever gonna go. That was the end of it. So, what we did, together with the union, we developed a career ladder which became the...All right? Seven, eight, nine, ten, eleven, twelve, thirteen, fourteen, even up to seventeen depending on your educational background. And for once we could pay the man who was the caregiver directly in touch with the patients a decent living so he didn't have to work two jobs, come in exhausted and try to treat somebody who needed you emotionally. So that sounds like pontificating maybe, I don't know. But I always thought it was beautiful. And I was on the threshold of the evolvement of two great things. The diminishment of the custodial care and the new modality for system treatment of the mentally ill. And the involvement of a great democratic union, that it is today. And then, of course, now I'm solely working with the town on a full-time basis, trying to retrieve the residue of what's left over.

F.V: So it sounds like both of those things came from the philosophy that made CSEA what it is today.

G.S. Absolutely.

F.V. Can you give me that philosophy in a few words...or a lot of words?

G.S. The philosophy was that, and you have to understand how the employees were at that time, they trusted no one anymore. They had been blunted, they had been promised, no increase in salary. All of them were working two jobs. But CSEA, it went from that dressed up kind of organization that met for retirement parties, and for other ceremonial things, and they worked together with each other because it was supervision that controlled it. But we belonged there because it was the only game in town. It was 10 cents a week, or whatever; it was, you know, it was very minimal. But we were all dying for some kind of representation. Something that would overcome the force and effect of the state. And you couldn't meet it as an individual. There's an old philosophical saying, "Individuals make noise, organizations make change." And you knew that. All my life I knew that. And that's why I joined on board. That's what made Zumo go, that's what made Joe Lavelle and that's what made Rego. All of these people went into there because they believed in somebody. Rego worked with me in the children's unit. Matt Zumo was a former president who worked with me. Joe Aiello. So we were all brothers, if you will. In a common philosophy. And we got to get a pair of real kneecaps after a while. First a little start, you know, "how many times can I lose my job" but then after a while you became very experienced. Thanks to Cornell and thanks to the educational programs that, they had. AFSCME was very instrumental in doing all that. I was an instructor. So you had many things that came in. Then we learned to take care of our employees. I used to have recognition night-steward's recognition night. Way back. In fact, the first one I had was with Al Worth's union. So I said, "This is the core of our group. These are the guys that are going to meet the grievances at the level. We have to teach them and they are going to represent us. And they are going to do the hard work for us." And it worked out fine. So every year since then, since I was involved with it. Even those who took after me was steward's recognition night. And I was happy when I saw AFSCME come in with their books, their steward books. This was great. So, we became more

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sophisticated. AFSCME gave us a great arrange of education and experience and a big pair of balls. You know, and that's important. Because to sit there at a negotiation with the state with 26 on one side and 26 on the other side, and them lying like hell, interesting thing... I have to curse at this one. Bob Gile was a hard-nosed negotiator, operator and field man and very devoted to McGowan. So we were at one of our first negotiations and they were lying like hell from one day to the other, "No, we never said that, we've got it in writing. That doesn't matter. You misinterpret that. And blah, blah, blah." And he would say, "You f-ing goddamned son of a bitches. You lying bastards." And I'm going like to him and I'm saying, "Bob, we're meeting with the state. You can't talk like that." He says, "Greg, make me a promise. A week from now see how you change." And a week from then we were doing this. Oh, they were so blatantly lying. Oh God. But they knew now that we weren't a Milquetoast little operation any more. And we had some good allies. Some good allies. Even, Featherstonhaugh, Roemer. Featherstonhaugh used to have dinner with Carey and breakfast with Governor Rockefeller. So there was some pull in there even if it was self-serving, all right? But he did help make the union in the beginning. Except, the motivation sort of changed in the later years. But they were a good outfit and represented us well at the time.

F.V. Yeah, we talked to Jack Rice a couple weeks ago.

G.S. Oh, God. That's a voice from the past.

F.V. And his son. Yeah, he had some good stories.

G.S. We had a nice young man called Lester Lipkin here as our particular lawyer for grievances and things that we went to court. Interesting thing, there was a doctor, Dr. Hanalori Lenhoff, who was a great environmentalist, saved the River with her own money, which the director never forgave her. And tried to get her for years. And anything he could to get her. He gave her terrible jobs and assignments. She loved animals, cats, third world countries. She collected books. She was always getting us to give something up for the third world. And then one day, it was Christmas Eve, I had 102 fever and she called me up, "I need Greg. I need you. They're gonna fire me." I said, "This is Christmas Eve, Hanalori. Please, it's administration building with the director and the personnel man." So my wife says, "No you don't. You've gotta go." So I got dressed and bundled up and I went to the thing and I says, "What's the charge?" Abusing. Verbally abusing a patient. And I said, "I'd like to confer with my grievance." And Hanalori and I went into another room and I says, "Hanalorl, what the hell is... Greg, the man is deaf. I had to shout at him so he can read my lips." But that doesn't matter so I went back and I says, "Do the charges." "Well you know, she resigns now, we do it very quietly, she will have no mark." And I said, "Bullshit." Because I knew McGowan would back me. So I got a hold of Lester Lipkin and we went to arbitration. Two years. They got their goddamn piece of salt from her. And hey put her through hell. Suspended her. And this block, you know, he used to put up his foot up on the thing and say, "I got her anyway." And I says, "You miserable bastard, what you put her through." We won, got all back pay, got everything back again. But I never forgot how brutally they fought. Now what the hell kind of kick do you get because the director was a control freak. He was from the old, "This is my turf. I do what I want on it and you do what I tell you." And that's the wrong thing to tell CSEA people at that time, okay. And I, you know, if you told me twenty years before that I would lose my job for principle, you know. The principle came and you reacted. It was nothing saying, "Hey, I'm an idealist. I'm going to charge the windmill."

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No, you were too much of a realist for that. But what happens; it evolves. And all those basic instincts come up. "I'm not gonna take your shit." That's wrong. It's basically, humanly wrong.

F.V. You basically have no choice. There's just one thing to do.

G.S. No. In fact, I don't think it ever, outside of going to my wife and saying, "Would it be all right if I lose my job?" You know? But other than that, it never came. It never came into your thought anymore. It was such a classical fight. And I guess we enjoyed. You know. You halve to say you enjoyed. You liked what you were doing because you were doing something for other people that had a reward to it. People wrongly accused. And with it you had to defend people who you knew were guilty. You always have to remember, that's something the members used to toss up on me. And when I'd say to them, "Look, you have to understand. It's the principle we're protecting. You can think what you want to. But you know, you know." And I said, "That may be. But that's not my choice. My choice is defend them under principles and the negotiations we made to protect employees in this respect. Whether guilty or not." And that was my answer to them. Because I'm protecting your principle. If I give in here with him what makes you so sure I won't give in for you?

F.V. That's what they call the slippery slope.

G.S. What do they say, "A man elected is a man corrupted?" An old French saying, you know. And I don't mean that in a demeaning way, but what I mean is that you're always obligated to somebody. And if you become obligated to somebody ... very hard to refuse him no matter what that might be. And there can be little things and there can be big things. This is what Dr. Nathan tried to trap me into. "Hey, tomorrow you'll want something and I'll give you something. But you give me today what I want." And we didn't. And thanks to Flannenbaum and all the other good people that were here, this is what made this region. You should see the classical fights between Bendette and Flannenbaum. They were classical. They were classical. All against whoever was the chair at that time. Whoever was the president. And it was South against the North. And then the two of them had a competition to go. Because in the beginning we didn't have a regional headquarters. Each local, in the early 70's, each local played host to the region, to all the other locals. So we would hire a hall or a restaurant and then everybody would have our meeting and we'd have our guests come, you know.

F.V. Do you like this system better?

G.S. And then Danny Donohue is the one who advocated buying this building. Which everybody says, "Ah what the hell did he get and what is he making out of it? This goddamn thing." Whatever he paid for it in the beginning is worth fifteen times as much. Maybe even twenty times as much. Great asset for CSEA. Going back to the second strike. Flashback. We're all preparing for the strike. We were not going to go through and I was not going to get tossed 50 feet on my ass and a car hitting me. So Danny says, "Greg, I don't want to hurt my own people. So I hired longshoremen for a hundred bucks a piece. They'll be on the picket line." I said, "Fine. I've contracted for three truckloads of dirt to come and put it on the entrance so they can't get through." Then we've got a guy with a wrecker who's going to take a burning car and go down so the people who are scabs, you know, won't see it like, "They're burning the car!" So we'll have our people...Sheridan was the plumber and knew where the backup pipe was because we had a sewer disposal system, all right? So he was going to take and lock that

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up so all that shit would back up into the wards. Okay. So if you're a scab, you're going to have a miserable time. All right. Anyway, had all that prepared. It cost us a lot of money, okay? But then, of course, they capitulated the state because of the first strike and we prevailed. But when you think back on that particular moment that ... you do some awful mean things. But you know, you were saying to yourself, "If we give in and we don't make our points and our negotiations we're all going to lose." And the momentum was strong. You know. We had one strike under our belt and very cocky, all right. And we began to feel our oats. And McGowan was that kind of a man. He was tough, simple. And his faults. . We all have faults. You know. Weaknesses and that. And you overlook and you say, "What is the common good he gave us?" And that's what you remember. Which was a great. He really advanced CSEA from an association, really, to a union. That's the legacy he left.

F.V. Right. So what is the future? What does the future say?

G.S. The future now is ... is very complicated. One, mental hygiene is gone, so the strength that you had before that is gone. Hopefully, with our merger with APSCME that we can pick up those operational people and other people, administrative people, who will fill in that void. Because people are now, since the sixties, are used to demonstrating. So they've gotten sort of a good pair of kneecaps, you know. It's not unnatural like it was in the beginning. "Oh, I don't want to be seen out there with a picket sign." You know. Now, today, it's a different story. And they're willing to fight for it. But organizations in the state downsizing. Nassau County is a terrible example of what happened. But you know, it was ... at 22,000 members in their union. I had took over attempts at union. They were having a problem and McGowan sent me down to straighten it out. But everybody was a committee man. Everybody was his own leader. I says, "Doesn't anybody over here come in by pure merit?" And he says, "Greg, I'll get shaped up." But you can see what happens to it now. Rita Wallace and her crew now have a hard job because Swayze is going after the unions. And it's money now. And it's a real ... it's not something that's imagined or they're putting up as a means to weaken your negotiation. It's true. So now you have to make a lot of decisions. Do we lose five to save ten? You know, this is what you have to do. So, it's more sophisticated than it was before. You have to know budgets. You have to know who allies with you and who run against you. You always had to do that but it's more critical now. And if you have to have a political action committee. If you don't have that, you lose your biggest weapon. Because, that's who you have to deal with. And this is what AFSCME has recognized as long time ago. Hey, politician is a politician, is a politician and the only way he reacts is if you take care of him campaign-wise. When we used to have our political action committee when I was there we interviewed them. They would say to us, "Give us your retirees and the telephones and the hell with the money." Because we could personal touch and talk to the different people and say, "Hey, Greg, you know, you're a local 411 out of a 413 member. We need this to survive." You could really talk to them. So this is what put them over maybe three or four thousand votes which made a difference in close election. So political action combined ... you never strike unless it's the last resort. I mean, nobody wins in a strike. Nobody wins. Takes a long time to get over it. But it's a time you have to say, "Put up or shut up" if you get driven to the wall. But political action saves a lot of that. You know, it brings you right to the brink and then you can say to them, "Hey, Guy, you know, we have this kind of committee and we have this amount of membership and we have our own lobby. This is what we want. We'll negotiate and compromise. We'll leave off you when you're having a trouble with your constituencies but

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you've got to help us with the others to pass it." You know the old game that you play with. And you build up a respect with them ... which is hard. Because they lie like hell. And nothing is sacred. Wertz is 24 years as our assemblyman and he is canned. His ... when you talk to him it's all canned speech. I have heard it 24 years. I've heard it 24 years ago and I hear it always. And it gets to be canned kind of speech. Same with _____ So you need young blood who have a pair of kneecaps also. But there's a price to pay. Every idea has a cost, okay? And every new guy, if he goes against the party, has a cost. And he doesn't last long. So, sophisticated political action, the ability to stand up when you have to stand up, good working crew, get rid of the dead wood, we can't afford it anymore. Okay? And nice is nice, but those days are gone. Okay? We built the union. Now the union should have the best. Did that sound like pontificating again?

F.V. No, no ... that's, that's...

G.S. A problem with old age, okay? As you look back you start to preach.

F.V. No, you can build opinions based just on your emotions.

G.S. Okay, so that's pretty much without...

F.V. Now, what about the move to include the private sector? That's the latest development in the CSEA. What are your thoughts about that?

G.S. We advocated that a long time ago.

F.V. Oh yeah?

G.S. We had the chance, when the nursing homes were coming up...

F.V. When was this?

G.S. This was back in 1968-69 when nursing homes were beginning to look for patients out here on the island and they were starting to build nursing homes. 1199 come in and grabbed them. We should have had them. They were in our turf. "No, no, we're a public service union and in no way we're going to get involved with the private sector. They don't understand." Which was all bullshit. In fact we should have gone a long time ago, Because there's nothing to say that, you know, we have the administrative unit which is the clerks and things. We had the institutional unit and we had the operationals unit. What's the matter with the private sector unit? Okay? But there was a great resistance to private because we were public. Now, you can't blame it. Their image was always Gutbaum, Teamster's or hey we don't want no part of it there. But it's one of the steps we could have been on the ground floor with. Now they're entrenched. We could not grab them anymore. But any new thing. The computers. Oh, God, that's a whole field that's wide open. You know. And if they resist the union as a beginning, make it an association first. Give them dignity and say, "Hey we're associates together. We're bound together in a common future." So you give them their dignity and their status and the whole bit. Then when they see that if they have to negotiate it they need more than that. But you can take them in that respect.

F.V. Sounds like the CSEA model ... start with association...

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G.S. Exactly. I mean, it worked before, why shouldn't it work again? So you make them associate members to begin with, only make them pay, all right? But creep and really go in and penetrate the computer market. The computer market, I mean, all the software, distribution, Internet, all of that is waiting to be taken. But you're going to have to take sophisticated organization to get there. You're going to have to get somebody who understands computer. We had a great... I forget his name... I was so amazed when he put all our membership on the computer. I don't know if he is still there or not, but I used to go to him all the time. I was fascinated. In fact, I bought a Radio Shack TRS-80 for my local. I talked a minute and they were like, "oh, oh, oh, oh." But I said, "If I can put all of the grievances that we've settled or lost, because they all have a common theme, and why we won and why we lost, I could call it up on the computer, or if I'm not- there Stuart could do that and say, "Well this is the way it was fought before. How can I take that and present that in a different way or in the same way?" But it didn't have the capacity. It had one little tape in the goddamn thing. But now, I can't write without a computer. I really can't write. I handle a whole bunch of organizations with the computer. It is so easy.

F.V. It does the grunt work.

G.S. It does more than that... it's instant information. When I want information what used to take me going to Riverhead or other little places I go to Google or Yahoo and I hit...

F.V. Google is great, yeah.

G.S. I ... one of the guys hit my name on it and it came up in a lot of little newspaper things and articles, you know. It's unbelievable what you get. Want to find out where Power-house is ... EM6000. You hit that and you get ... cost me forty-nine dollars for a goddamn ink jet every time I use that up once a month. But it's so fascinating for the amount of information. Information is gold, it means that you can fight. You can really fight if you've got the facts. Because when I first, way back in 1957, when I started the first civic association John Clyne became later county executive but he was the town supervisor. I remember having a couple hundred people up there screaming and yelling and I was doing great, you know. Real old union style, waving and doing my thing and clapping, a great big hand. And he'd say, "Szurmcki, thank you. Next..." It took me six months to realize I had, no substance. All I had was bullshit, you know. You know, it thought that a couple hundred people would do the trick, you know, but it doesn't. So then you learn from then on you research and get information whether you're doing a contract or whether you're doing a bargaining or whether you're out recruiting. Whatever you do, know who and what that goal is and who the people involved are. And it's so easy today. It's so easy today.

F.V. What do you think of the CSEA web site?

G.S. I don't know..

F.V. Well, check it out and let us know what you think.

G.S. I will. I will do that. I think it's time for them to do that...

F.V. Oh, it's there.

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G.S. I mean, Web site, even for the civic association I have a Web site.

F.V. I have my own now too. Yeah.

G.S. It does a lot of work for you. It does a lot of work. Good communications. And it's a powerful, powerful tool for communication. And not to use that is to be backward. And it's a wonderful tool for recruitment because I have it on mine and it works out fine. And you have four or five different titles and membership. Boom. The whole application is out. Fill it out. And you can either e-mail it or send it, whatever you want. You know. So it brings headquarters which always so remote from Albany, down to the common guy. Retirees are great people. Use them. God Almighty. But more than that, all these field men that are retired. Their experience is unbelievable. They know all the areas but get them going to an ice age ... we're the new age now. Because that's where the new employee is. You have immigrants coming in doing the menial jobs but everybody is going to go fighting with them all over the place.

F.V. It's the same cycle.

G.S. So, there's an untapped source. And then the other source, of course, is the professional. Take back the PS&T we lost. I remember...

F.V. Do you think that's the biggest mistake they made?

G.S. It was not a mistake ... it was a happening that evolved which nobody had the experience really or the know-how or the guts to control in any way. The kindest thing I could say, it happened. Okay? For many reasons and you can't take that back but it's a learning experience. But you can redevelop that again in the field of computers. Professional people, you know. And that's great. And that's the field I think I would train new field men to develop with a background. You know, if you have to send him to school for programming or whatever. Somebody who could sit down with Mr. Smith who is a programmer and talk his language.

F.V. They've got to find people like you who have fire in their belly.

G.S. Oh, they, they're out there. You've got to get them. Usually, they're shy in the corner. They're, you know, hey, I'm not going to open my mouth. This is an organization, they must know everything they're doing, you know. But you find out later that ... but that doesn't matter. That's in any organization.

F.V. But in a union, the union is the people. More than any other organization around.

G.S. I think CSEA is, and I have to say AFSCME now, are the only ones that care for the little people. All their publications. All their honors and all their issues are oriented around people who are fighting for something or bettering their lot. And they're doing it nationally, which is fabulous. But the teachers' union... it's so big it's crippling our education system. They can say what they want, but I think we're better than that. We're better than that. Always believed that. It's what we fought for. There's a little spark in there that says you're still for the little guy. And I think that's where the grounding and mental hygiene came. And the clerks and the people who used to cry because they were all alone in there with so much work. We used to buy them pencils and buy them paper and pencils so they would be loaded with caseloads and the doctor

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would scream at them to get them on. And I don't even have a pencil, I don't have a pad. We'd buy them for the damn and curse out the doctor, you know. We even removed one doctor. Oh, God. But, anyway, these are the things that you're a true advocate. In a place where someone has no control. And that's the first law, I guess, of organization. To find those people who have no control. Or lost their control. And then advocate for them. Empower them, if you want to use that kind of language. But ...

F.V. Well, did we leave anything out?

G.S. I don't know. You know, the rest is all- little details. You know. Convention details.

F.V. Well, details are good.

G.S. First convention. Mental Hygiene convention. We're all in a great big hall and I forget, I can't recall the man's name, but I can see him, all right? He was sort of heavy, stout and he was chair of the mental hygiene convention. And we had a polish guy from Brooklyn. I forget his name. But he was half bombed. And when my first experience and I says, "What the hell kind of a chair is this. What kind of an organization is this?" It's the Mental Hygiene committee, all right. This Polish guy is cursing at the guy, at the chair, and he says, "You're gonna change that or I'm gonna change it for you!" and he ran up and they were going to start fighting. It was a militant group. You had to know how to control ... and Bob Gile it on that perfect. Bob Gile was a tough onle. He cold cocked the sheriff. What did he do? The guy was in civilian clothes and we were in one of those hotels. And he was speaking about CSEA. And he, without any warning, hit him and away he went. The guy went right onto the floor. I don't know whether they arrested him or not, I forget what it was but that's the kind of guy he was. CSEA was his love. We had another wonderful person called Julia Duffy, Pilgrim State hospital, who was a nurse, who gave up her title to remain in CSEA. What a pair of kneecaps she had. Oh, God Almighty. She used to call up Miller, who was the commissioner of Mental Hygiene, at 2:00 in the morning. And the first labor management meeting we had with the commissioner of Mental Hygienek all of us are all, you know, putting on our best attire and our best faces and she comes walking in and she sits down and she says, "Jesus Christ, Miller, you look like Jesus Christ, take the goddamn beard off." We were all astounded, you know. My God. How could you say that to the commissioner right? But he loved it. He says, "Duffy, please stop calling me at 2 in the morning." But she started the first daycare center. I remember we negotiated a daycare center on the grounds. So she started the first one. I started the second one. That was the only two we had on the island at that time. And every time you looked at her she wanted another three dollars, or four dollars, or a dollar or whatever it is for her kids. And a heart as big as...as big as the world. I think her son died in Pearl Harbor because he was buried out in Hawaii. She'd go there and visit.

F.V. When was this fist daycare center? What year was that?

G.S. Trying to think back...it's got to be... 1969 went to Northeast Nassau, 67-68 was mine, but she was way before that. Really, when the first negotiation going back to mental hygiene agreement way back to 1970 or 1971. Tough as nails. The strike. The 1973 strike. The man, Alan Weinstock and his brother Dean Weinstock. Alan Weinstock is now the director of Pilgrim State Hospital. Both of them were sixteen or seventeen years old. Nobody could go in the of f ice but we

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had to cover it somehow so Julia had them go sit in the office because they were kids so they couldn't be arrested. When you think back on that, you know, here's the guy, later director. Because then they had internships for administrative post which was take over the hospital. But I always remember that and I kid him when I see him. So, those are little things that come back that you think of that make the memory of that. Very strong people. Dorothy King of was another one. I used to drive up with her to the board of directors meeting every month with her. And she was tough. We had Julia Duffy driving, we had Dorothy King, myself in the back and I think I had Pat Curtain's brother with me and we were going to go to eat in a German place after the board of directors meeting. And I-90 is a very busy place. So her and Dorothy are arguing. They're always arguing. And she says, "Goddamn, Dorothy, I'll do that!" and she turned right in the middle of I-90 and turned... I died. I died! All I could see was the headlights coming and I says, "Goddamn you, Duffy, why did you do that?" She says, "You have no guts." She was a powerful woman. So that's the kind of women and men who were strong-willed. They were sacrificing, that's another key. She gave up her nurse's item to remain in CSEA. That's fabulous, okay? So you had a lot of people who sacrificed in many different ways to build the union. And, hopefully that carries on. And I'm sure it will. I see when I read the AFSCME papers and the, what is the new one now? It's not Public Sector it's something else.

F.V. The Workforce.

G.S. Workforce. But it doesn't...

F.V. You don't like it?

G.S. No, it doesn't express really what you...

F.V. I was just going to suggest that you write some articles for it.

G.S. But anyway, that's really what it's about, I guess. It's... there's so many people that have done that and are doing it. And I'm sure they'll continue it on.

F.V. Great. Wonderful. If there's anything else, this is the time.

G.S. Oh, gosh...

F.V. You've covered a lot of ground. I love it.

G.S. Yes. It's a lifetime.

F.V. I think you're one of the youngest people we've interviewed, I mean in memory and spirit. It's just fabulous.

G.S. No, you never lose that. And I think doing civics, of course I did civics when I was at the hospital and there. All of three was a triad that had to ... it you did one you had to do the other two. Because they were all connected. And it was usually the same people. And I remember we were fighting a landfill next to the school. The elementary school. And my kid was going to it. So I had the woman blocking the trucks from coning in and spilling. You know what they were doing, not only the landfill, but they were spilling liquid waste with a pool 300 feet long and 15 foot deep and wide. And now they were going to dig up

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garbage and put it in there? So I had channel 4 come down. We had a mortician with a coffin ... we did the old ... you know, the old traditional things, right? And it was fun. You could see the faces on the guys coming in with their cesspool waste. You know. A mother with her baby in front of the truck. "Get out of here, lady!" And she says, "No, no, you get out of here!" Great. Really great stuff. And we got the ... this is where words came in handy. He got the hospital and OMH to give the liquid disposal plant to the town so that stopped that kind of dumping in there. It's a maze. The kids could play in it like it was a lake. But they did get their landfill in which is closed now. Now it's a golf course on top, which is crazy. But anyway, out of that came some good and now we have a liquid disposal plant. And so that was another plus. There were a lot of little plusses that come up that you don't think of, you know? As you recall. And they were all good efforts, you know? Fun. I would never take ... when I'd go through a town hall, when I wanted to make a point would I tell them, "Okay, we're only going to give up fifteen minutes till the media goes. So we're going to walk in front of the place, we're going to go up the stairs and back out again. And then you go home." Because by that time all the reporters in there were taking pictures. We attracted them by the picket line. And supervisor there, including Fitzpatrick who was there, were like, "You can't do that. That's illegal. I'll have you put in jail." "I'm sorry, Sir, but I had no control over them." But it was fun. But then they learned. They learned to respect you. They were going to dig up what is now Flynn Memorial Park. Flynn Memorial Park was named after one of the youngest men whose father I knew that worked at the hospital who got blown up in a jeep in Vietnam one week after he was up there. Now, we managed to get a whole 20 acre park next to the MSF, okay? The landfill. But the supervisor wanted to dig it up. So we did a whole big thing. Embarrassed the hell out of them. We had a special meeting. We had all the people come down and we had a whole line, including the military. Vietnam, American Legion, VFW and residents in there. And they were all good knowledgeable, articulate speakers. When they got finished they went ... the executive session comes back and says, "Okay, you've got the field." You can't go against motherhood, God, country and apple pie. And today it's used by a lot of teams. A lot of teams play there. And at night it doesn't bother anybody. It's not shining on any houses or whatever. It's ideal for it...That was another one. On, and on, and on you do these thing. But it's always been a lot of fun.

F.V. Well, this has been great fun for me. I've really enjoyed it.

G.S. Nice memories. Nice memories. God has been good to me.

F.V. Yeah. Thank you for being good to us. It's great.

G.S. Well, they were good to me...was good to me. Union was good to me. You know, you were a big boy. You did things no one told you you had to do. And I enjoyed it.

F.V. Well, one of the things about a good union is that it takes the voice of all the people in it and lets you speak your mind...

G.S. Well, look at all your union people. A lot of them are involved civically, politically. You know, we're public employees but all of us are doing something. The mile walk, cerebral palsy, stroke, you can name them all. I remember that was something. When you walked the ward there was always three or four guys who said, "Hey, Greg. Payday. Give me a buck." So you went and you did your pay-off. I says, "You're worse than the Mafia."

F.V. It's a special breed.

G.S. You know, all we hear is the bad. You never hear the good. Never hear the good. Kids are wonderful. We've got such bright kids. Jesus, in the schools you've got such bright kids. But you don't hear that. You hear somebody's shooting somebody.

F.V. You know what they say, "News is bad news. Advertising is good news."

G.S. Yeah. Thank God for the remote.

F.V. Right.

G.S. Okay. Well I think at this point in time I'm a little ... run out of a little bit of memory.

F.V. Well, if you've got more, we'll come back. Don't worry.

G.S. Okay.

F.V. It was great. Thank you very much.

G.S. It was a pleasure. It was nice to talk.