

Interview with Judy Richardson

JV: Introduce yourself and tell us how you started at CSEA and...

JR: Okay. I'm Judy Richardson. I was the director of insurance for CSM. My career started in 1975 when I went to work for the state.. At that time, I was on probation. The state was calling ... or negotiating their contract and they were talking about strikes. I was panic stricken because I thought, I'm on probation; they'll fire me. I've always been a firm believer in unions. I did help some co-workers with pulling stuff out of the Xerox machine, taking tapes out of typewriters. I kind of did it on the QT so nobody would know. Thank God the strike didn't go on. It settled at the last minute. Getting started with CSEA, I was the chairperson of the election committee for environmental conservation, where I worked. I couldn't find anybody who wanted to run for office, or anyone to run against the incumbent officers, so I had said to the local president at the time, if I wasn't on the election committee, I'd run for an office just for competition. She says, good, as of now, you're off the election committee. So I thought, well, I'll run for vice president because that would have been the easiest with learning the union. So I ran for vice president and, surprisingly, I won. So I took some courses at SUNY at Albany on labor relations and labor studies and got to know the union. I then became a member of the CSEA standing insurance committee and... that was in 1978, I believe. So I was on the insurance committee--In 1981, I became the chairperson of the standing insurance committee. I held that position until I ran for board of directors for environmental conservation. I became just a member of the committee at that time, no longer the chairperson because you couldn't be a chair, you couldn't be on the board of directors, hold both offices. In 1986, there was a vacancy for the director of insurance with CSEA. I applied for it. I did get the job. So I've been an employee of CSFA since 1986. I've seen both sides, I've been on the board of directors, I went to the meetings, I went to the conventions, the workshops. In the olden days, everyone's heard about the Concord Hotel. You would sit there in the dining room for dinner and you'd just write the list of the room parties. Everybody had--all the different locals had room parties. So we used to go from room to room. But we always made the meetings. We loved it when Jerry Worth--he was the then president of AFSCME--we loved it when he got up to talk because he would talk for so long. That's when you took your nap. Their I remember the year they had to collect money for political action. They decided to have a wet T-shirt contest. So they tried getting me into the T-shirt contest. I told them I didn't have enough scotch in me yet so ... So he gave me--Bernie Ryan--he was the director of political action at the time--he gave me a scotch and water, he gave me a T-shirt, he says, have a drink, put the T-shirt on if you want. I remember when they started auctioning for the wet T-shirt contest, and John Featherstonehaugh, who was the lead counsel, he put his T-shirt on as a diaper. They collected quite a bit of money. We had a lot of fun, but we were also there for all the meetings and a lot of business was conducted, and, like I said, I've always been a true believer in unions. Even today, I--in fact, last week, I was arguing with my neighbors because they're anti-union and we got into a heated discussion about that, but no one will ever convince me that we should go without unions.

JV: Let's go back to the Concord and those parties. Who gave the beat parties?

JR: I don't know. I used to...I mean, I remember when they moved a piano into the elevator and brought the piano into one of the rooms for the room parties.

JV: You say, "they." Who's they?

JR: Different activists. I know Joe Blair was one. I can't remember. It was so many years ago. But we used to have a great time. I would always kick off my shoes because my feet would be hurting, and lose my shoes. I've lost more pairs of shoes at the Concord Hotel, so if anybody saw shoes around, they said, oh, Judy was here, and would grab my shoes for me.

JV: I've got some standard questions. Now, you know a lot about CSEA. What are you most proud of at CSEA?

JR: I'm proud of the unity of CSEA. Everyone, you know, they talk about CSEA being a family, and that is one thing that no one can ever take away from CSEA. We're all very close. We know we're there for each other. That's what the union is about.

JV: That started at the beginning. CSEA was really first an association before it was a union.

JR: Yes. Years ago CSEA was like a social organization. You know, you joined the union and it didn't do a lot, but, over the past 25 years I'd say, it has really become a union and they are someone to be reckoned with. The officers at CSEA, everyone one of them, they work hard; they work hard for the members and I could never say enough good things about them. And not only because I'm on tape, either. I've loved them all dearly.

JV:

JR: Yes, very much so. Danny used to go around and kiss all the girls' necks and they loved it. In fact, he still does.

JV: What do you see as the most important events?

JR: Most important events? Getting fair contracts for our members. Good working...

JV: Were you involved in the fight for that?

JR: I wasn't in contract negotiations or anything like that. I walked a picket line-not the picket line, but the rallies and different things only getting a better contract for the members, and I ... you know, just the working conditions for the Members have improved immensely-And I mean, now, a state employee, they're paid a decent salary for their work. Years ago, I, being in the insurance department at CSEA, years ago, you had to put your annual salary on the application because your amount of coverage was based on your annual - salary, and, back in the 50s, early 1960s, CSEA members made about \$1500 a year. They made \$2000 a year. Just to see, you know, the contracts that are negotiated now. State employees and local government employees, they can be proud of their salaries.

JV: What are you most disappointed by?

JR: What am I most disappointed by? One of the biggest problems within the union and it's not only CSEA, it's probably a lot is lack of communication. They have to really communicate with different departments to let people know what is going on, because sometimes you'll find out after the fact. One of the biggest obstacles they have is communication within the organization.

JV: It's probably a matter of size. The bigger you get, the harder it is to communicate...email...

JR: Well, it does make it easier, but a lot of times, things, to on. That people aren't aware of. And departments that should be aware of things sometimes are not.

JV: What would you change?

JR: That's a good question. Just to send out memos or emails just to the departments, if they're talking about something in contract negotiations. Well, if they're talking insurance, for instance, Get in touch with the appropriate people...

JV: Good. All right. I've got one more question, which is kind of a big one. What lessons do you think CSEA's history-the past, what did you learn from the past-what does it hold for the people of the future of CSEA?

JR: Well, I know CSEA, they represented public employees. Now, with the organizing, they're getting into the private sector as well. An employee is an employee, whether they're working for the public or the private. A lot of them are now doing the same work because the public employees are now becoming private employees. For the organization to get these people involved and to be able to get more members into the union. I see it happening now with the organization movements we have.

JV: So the history of CSEA is keeping up with-the worker.

JR: It is keeping up with the working. It is generating more members and better working conditions for the employees.

JV: All right. Well, this is your chance. If there's anything that we didn't touch on, stories that you remember...

JR: Nothing really.

JV:

JR: Yeah, we did cover a lot. As I say I'm just a firm believer in Unions. Also, I joined CSEA as a retiree member because the state and I'm collecting a state pension. I worked for I'm eligible to be a CSEA member. I told Danny and I told the others, I will be involved, and I will work as a retiree.

JV: You're going to watch out for the insurance for the employees?

JR: Oh, yes.

JV: It never ends.

JR: It never ends. (laughs)

JV: Thank you very much.