

Interview with Ellen Burke

EB: My name is Ellen Burke and I started at the University at Albany in 1965 and I retired in 2000. I recall the first time I got involved at CSEA was through a grievance I had in 1970 and we got things resolved. I still wasn't ready to join the union and although I went to the union you didn't have to join then. A woman named Mary Juracki helped point out the benefits of what I had just gone through and got me to come to a meeting and from that point on I have been an activist until the time I retired. And I am sort of...I am in the retirees local. I haven't gotten involved yet because I am working on some other projects right now.

FV: They'd better watch out.

EB: They'd better watch out! I'm still young enough to kick around, so I can kick something.

FV: So, activism. What's it all about? What have you done? What kind of things?

EB: It's getting involved to make things right and to keep things right once they're there. I think years ago when I first got involved in the union a lot of our meetings were social events. I worked in the age of Nelson Rockefeller, money was plentiful, jobs were plentiful but over time austerity budgets came in. We came upon hard times at various stages and you didn't have the staff you had and the need for the union became more evident at that point. I know that women's issues, of course, that's something that is special to me. Women's issues really weren't addressed way back in the 70's when I first got involved. Women's jobs were considered secondary. The male person in the job supported the household. So they didn't really address the needs of women way back then. It was a good old boys' club and I have to be honest, that's exactly how I felt in some respects back then. But I was there at the convention when the Women's Committee became a standing committee against a little opposition but not the women's opposition. So, that was kind of the beginning of the union recognizing that women were here to stay in the work force and as you know, they have grown to either at least half, if not more than half of the work force today. I know that there were a lot of issues they didn't deal with that women had to face on the outside and this was a big part of the growth. I think CSEA was one of the first unions that I can recall of just other unions out there that actually started moving on women's issues. And they're very strong today in their support of women's issues. Whether it's daycare, whether it's elder care, whether it's childcare. They recognize that women need to have these needs addressed.

FV: Let's go back to the beginning of the Women's Committee. I want to know about people's actions, who did what, how it got there, how it even got to be presented.

EB: Well, I'm not exactly sure how it got to be presented. I know that a lot of people felt that the women were moving in the right direction within CSEA and it was time that they had a standing Women's Committee. And there was opposition from a lot of men, "Well, we don't have a men's committee."

FV: Leaders?

EB: Leaders. Local leaders.

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FV: Give me names.

EB: I can't even recall. I know that one of the big forces in having the Women's Committee a standing committee was Helen Zacko who eventually went on to be chair for a few years of the women's committee. And I don't know exact dates. I just know that it was a rousing success to become a standing committee from the delegate floor.

FV: And this was what year?

EB: I'm not sure. It was in the 80's but I'm not sure. I became involved as an officer in 182 and it was sometime around that point.

EV: All right. Let's back up then before that was and follow your career. How did you become an officer? What happened?

EB: Our secretary quit and I was a shop steward and I had attended a few meetings here and there whenever I was asked and I would help out whenever they had ticket sales or a party or an event. They would get CSEA members to help out.

FV: How did you get to be a shop steward?

EB: Mary Juracki. Mary Juracki is the woman who convinced me after my grievance to get involved. My grievance was back in 1970. And so I was a shop steward but I didn't do anything but post and help out wherever they needed. I'd post things on the bulletin boards. I wasn't an active shop steward as far as we know shop stewards today.

FV: Yeah, it's different.

EB: It's different. And our secretary quit and I said, "Okay," when they said, "Would you fill in for our secretary?" And I liked it. I liked the people I met. I liked listening to what their concerns were and I liked seeing what I could do about it. And I think that's how I got started and then I ran for secretary. And from that point on I was the secretary. I ran for third vice president and won. And I ran for second vice president and I ran for first vice president. And that's as...far as I wanted to go because I got involved with the women's committee in 1984 on the region level and then in 1985 on the statewide level.

FV: You know, it seems like to me that in CSEA you can go as far as you want to go. It's an amazing organization in that sense, because you are empowered. And you rise to the level of your own capability.

EB: I think one of the points I would like to make is CSEA does train their people. There are all sorts of workshops out there for the members that help them run for office, that help them get politically involved, that help them grow as a person and as an activist. They don't just leave you hanging out there like some other unions I know that give you a book and say, "Here, you're the shop foreman or you're the shop steward," or whatever and handle these things. They have very little training. But I don't think CSEA does that. They know the importance of training their people properly so that they can go back to the workplace and help their members out effectively.

FV: Is there a name for that program? The education program?

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EB: The education program. There is a health and safety committee. They deal with health and safety issues and they have a committee made up of the members. They are constantly giving out literature that deal with all of the ... whether it's carpal tunnel syndrome or workman's comp, there's a booklet out there and any member can get that booklet whether they're an activist or not. They just need to call down to headquarters or go through their offices to get a copy of that book.

FV: I remember some ... wasn't there a booklet that became like the template for the rest of the country or something that started here?

EB: I believe so. I believe also the way CSEA handled that now other unions are starting to train their members. And that was a long time coming because they just felt as though they weren't in charge. And while we have an executive staff here. We have Danny and Marian and Maureen and we have Barbara. And they're not our bosses although they kid around and call - Danny their boss. They're kind of like our guiders. It's our union and we make the decisions. It's a democratic union, I think, and it's one of the reasons we have gotten so far today. And with the climate the way it is today, the economic climate, unions are facing tough times all over the country and I think that CSEA is still very strong. They are very strong politically. The politicians look to CSEA for their support and they also recognize the power that I think CSEA has today. And that's the thing I've seen grown over the years. There was not a lot mentioned about politics way back when I first got involved. Now it's a big thing.

FV: What I've learned from talking to people from 100 years old to now is that it's an amazing transformation because it started ... well, you know the history of CSEA. -It started as an association more of a social club than anything.

EB: Exactly.

FV: How did that happen? I mean, you know the history of it. Who or what happened?

EB: I'm not really sure how it all began but I know it stemmed from people... from what I'm reading of the earlier history before I was involved; there were a lot of people who were disenchanted. Some of the benefits we have today they didn't have way back when. The hours were longer, there was no vacation, there was no sick and people grumbled about it but there was no venue for them to bring their grumblings to and I think this is how it started as a gripe session for people to get together and kind of, "Let's see what we can do about this." And such is the birth of unions, I guess, and CSEA is no different. This is basically how I have been led to believe it started. I mean, I'm retired but I'm not as old as the union.

FV: I didn't mean to imply you were.

EB: Oh no, no. I've been there a while and...

FV: But you knew ... you've been there a while and when you first joined the union who was the president then?

EB: Theodore Wenzl.

FV: What do you know of him?

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EB: Well, he was not the president for very long after I got involved but I do know that I went to a rally down at the Palace Theater and I do know that they wanted the members to vote for a strike. And the members said, "No, we're not voting for a strike." They weren't ready for it. They didn't want it. There was a lot to face even back then and I do know that Mr. Wenzl was very upset about it and walked offstage. And I don't remember a whole lot about him after that, to be honest with you. I was only going to bits and pieces of meetings whenever I was asked and they needed an extra delegate. And back then you could just say, 'I want you, you and you to be a delegate. It wasn't where right now you have to be elected and everything, you know. They could just pick anybody to go and attend these.

FV: When did that change?

EB: Progressively, probably from the 80s on. I don't know the exact dates. You know, it wasn't anything I had to pay attention but over time then you had to be a delegate...in fact, over time, the rules and regulations of how you ran became more strict. And it's almost a good thing because you can't have just anyone come in and decide they want to run for any office without any training or experience. I always felt very strongly, I started as a secretary and I worked my way up. I never felt qualified to go in and be a president of a local. There are people who do. You have to have some rules and regulations. You have to have some methods for running and qualifications. And maybe they need a few more. I don't want it to be restrictive because it's the people's union but I still think that you need qualified people in there to do this job and to do it right. Because what we do at the workplace and how we represent our members affects how the union looks in the eyes of management. And that's what's important.

FV: And it's important, as somebody said earlier when we were talking, there's a culture at CSEA and there's a language. Like with any culture there's a special language that you ... you want to know how everybody communicates and there's a certain way to communicate. Did you find that? Do you have to learn that?

EB: Yeah, you go in green and then you come out knowing exactly what somebody's talking about even though you weren't even part of the conversation. You'll hear a key word here or there and you seem to know what issue they're talking about. I think that comes from the networking and camaraderie that people have. And you know I have always been a strong defender of my right to go away to a conference or a workshop to learn what I have to learn and there are people back in the workplace, see we're not just fighting management, we also fight our own workers. They want us to be there, to work hard for them but they also chastise us when they have to answer the phones or whatever when we're not there and we're at these meetings. But it is because of those meetings that allow us to learn what we have to learn to understand what our members are looking for and how to represent them to management when they have an issue they need addressed.

FV: So is there a need, do you think, for more communication with those grumblers?

EB: I think so. You know, it's really very hard. People go away to workshops but they also come back from workshops and they have their own job to do as well. And sometimes, pardon the language, but you're damned if you do and damned if you don't. But you have to have a strong constitution about what you're doing to be involved in the union. You can't just go in there for the social portion of

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it. And there is a certain camaraderie with people when we go away to a workshop. Part of that appeal of a workshop is to get to meet other people and interact with them and socialize because what do you do when you're away? I mean, you're not in your home. You can sit and watch TV in a hotel room but what you do is you socialize and meet people and a lot of times, you were talking about the issues that are bothering one person at the workforce and it's over a cup of coffee or a sandwich or something and then the next thing you know, they'll say, "Well, I've got that same problem here. How did you handle it?" So, even aside from the workshops, aside from the meetings and aside from the delegates you've got that networking and people helping people. And they understand because they've been there, done that. So they can interact and relate to each other. I think that's where the family comes into the union.

FV: Yeah. It sounds like it's very rewarding, psychologically, actively to be an activist.

EB: Oh, it is. I think so. It is. It's a lot of work but you've got to like it. You've got to really get into it.

FV: I just love this organization. And the way people deal with it and love it and join it and...

EB: Oh, sure...

FV: And make it. I mean, it wouldn't be what it is without people like you.

EB: Oh, sure, and we don't always agree. My husband and I have been on different, he was a union activist, he was too. He's not currently, but he was for many years and we don't always agree on the issues. But that's what's good about CSFA, it's a democratic union. We may not always agree but in the end you have to support the decisions that are made.

FV: Yeah. I bet you go home and say to your husband, "Listen, you didn't win the Irene Carr leadership award!"

EB: Oh, that's funny. I have to say, I mentioned this when I got the award, but my husband went with me to all the workshops and I can't tell you the things I had him lug around and the things I had him carry to the workshops. And I'd be at a table and I'd say, "Oh, Honey, I need this. Go and get this. Go tell them to turn the heat up," or whatever it is, you know. He was right there.

FV: So are you sharing the award with him?

EB: Oh yeah. Yeah, he got to go and have a free dinner.

FV: Now, this won't be bragging on your part if I ask you this question, but when they gave you the award, what did they say? Why did they give you the award?

EB: I guess it was because of a commitment to women's issues that I felt very strongly about when I first began in 1984. The union handled programs that were specifically union oriented. Those were the workshops and the programs that they had. And so they should have. They needed to address pay equity, which wasn't a real strong back then, but the men made the money so they were supporting the household. Women's was supplemental. But, I believed that the union needed to

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change its course of direction and they needed to start dealing with personal needs issues that women faced outside the union because no matter how many programs you offered them, whether it was CSEAP, LEAP or whatever at the time, unless they could address the issues that they were facing every day before they get to the workplace, whether it's they were the primary care keeper, the primary person responsible if the child was sick, they had to take care of the house, do the grocery shopping, do the laundry. And that was a way of life back then. That was what women faced back then and yet they were starting to go out into the workforce whereas their male counterparts would go into the workforce and they would come home and say, "What's for supper?" Okay, so things needed to change. There were battered women. They would be battered and have to go in and still carry out their job and try to cover it up. The union needed to, if they were going to address the progress for women through the union, they needed to address those issues too. And I felt very strongly about that. And it wasn't exactly the most popular ideal at the time, but I wasn't going to back down and I think, and I mean, I had some resistance but it took off. Region four was very well-known for the programs that we started. And it filtered into statewide and today they still cover union issues but they also cover those personal needs issues. Because although we've made a lot of progress there's still a lot to go in the union and you have new people in the union and they may be facing some of those things. Maybe they haven't been out and involved and know that there's help out there that they can deal with certain issues. So, I felt very strongly then and I feel strongly now that it should stay and they should still work on it and maybe... I didn't back down ... and I guess perhaps maybe that's the reason. I don't know.

FV: That sounds good. Sound's great to me. So let's have a little history of fighting for these rights. Who and where did the opposition come from and what did you have to do to overcome it? Let's hear the history of all that.

EB: Well, the men in the union didn't think it was necessary. **FV:** outside their...

EB: Yeah, they just felt that was their place. "What do you mean it's an issue?" And it was an issue.

FV: All men? All the men in the union? The leaders?

EB: The leaders, our locals were run by predominantly men. And they didn't see any need to even send a woman to a woman's conference in the beginning. Our first regional conference had 50 people in it. The next year, we had 125 or something like that. It grew and then, what I thought was most important was; it wasn't just women going to the conferences. They were seeing what we were talking about. Because, not only were they married to women, they had daughters,

FV: They all had mothers!

EB: They had mothers, they had women in the workplace and they were multiplying and they had to represent those women as well. And so what better way of understanding it all but to go to these conferences.

FV: Well, at least they were willing to do that.

EB: Oh yeah. And so we started with one man, I know it was Charlie Staff. He was the first guy at our women's; he was the only male, at our women's

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conference. And it started from that point on and he brought more men. He would take the workshops we did, the topics, back to his workplace and he would hold workshops at his work site because he saw the need. He understood and he said to me he didn't understand it all before. He didn't think there was a problem, that was the way society was. Women did this and men did this. But when women go to the workforce, you know, it's got to be a 50/50 proposition. They can't be responsible for all of the stuff outside and still be able to handle their job at the workplace. And so, there was resistance but each year it got better and better and better as more men came to the conference. And I'm sure there's a few diehards out there who still want a men's committee. But that's okay too. We've made a lot of progress. The union has made a lot of progress. And I worked through as a women's committee chair and being on the statewide women's committee I served through Bill McGowan and Joe McDermott and Danny Donohue.

FV: What kind of reaction did they have to your concerns--each of them?

EB: They were supportive. Bill McGowan was supportive. So was Joe. Joe was a little reserved. Danny is a butch. He is a much more upbeat guy, okay? Bill McGowan was kind of...be curs and be cats, you know, he kind of had a language of his own and he was kind of comical, but he was kind of the last of the old union bosses that you kind of looked at.

FV: Cigar?

EB: Yeah, the cigar and everything. He kind of reminded me of that. But he was ... he seemed very supportive. I'm sure the leadership did not support the standing committee. I know that they didn't. They didn't think it was necessary. But it's there. It's something that I don't think you'll ever find them being able to take away at this point. And overall, I think as time went on they've become more supportive. And they know. Danny knows. He knows the women are out there and we I re out there to stay, so I just, I think overall in time they've all become very supportive of the women's issues.

FV: That's the way union is. The people deciding what they want and what they need.

EB: Yeah.

FV: So you really jumped in once you became an activist, didn't you?

EB: Well, I tried. I served on a lot of committees. We had a newsletter at the local and I did our newsletter and I think I kind of became a workaholic within that because one thing led to another and everything I did was interesting, so...

FV: And you saw results too, right?

EB: And I saw results. I know one of the things Danny touched on when I got my award was my local president, Ellen Kriskowski and I, worked ... we had a lot of cleaners who were never going to be able to take advantage of any of the educational benefits them members had because they didn't have the education themselves and they couldn't...a lot of them were immigrant workers who spoke a language from their home country and very little English. And we were able to convince our management that in order for them to be more productive employees and be able to better themselves and also help... I mean they were reading

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labels and mixing chemicals to clean without being able to really understand whether this could really be mixed with this,

FV: Safety issues.

EB: A safety issue. I think that we were able to convince them to allow us to have work relief and start a program, a basic skills program so that-and CSEA was offering the training over there to get your GED. And from that point on, several of the women cleaners were able to get their GED and they go work relief time to go for the courses that were during their work schedule. So it was just things like that. I mean, a little help doesn't hurt.

FV: Yeah, and every time you got a victory you went a little farther.

EB: We felt good. And then we said, 'Well let's see. What can we do next?'

FV: This is a great description of the union. It works.

EB: Yeah, when it works you find out what else can we do. Okay, so we've done this, now let's try this but let's keep an eye to make sure that what we did over here doesn't go by the wayside. Because that's all part of it. It's not just getting more stuff for us. In this climate it may be difficult to get a whole lot more, but we also have unions across the country that are giving back. And it's important for the union to keep strong, be strong and be together so that we don't lose the benefit it's we already have. And that unity is going to be very important in the next couple of years.

FV: Now, when CSEA became part of AFSCME, were you around?

EB: Yeah.

FV: You were part of and you saw what was going on. Tell me how you saw that and what happened?

EB: Well, I had mixed feelings at the time because our local had mixed feelings. We did not want to give up our CSEA as we knew it. We didn't want to become part of something else because we thought we would lose our identity once that happened at that time. But I don't think we have and there was mixed feelings even in my own local when the votes came out and different people were asking about, what should we do? I mean, our delegates voted a split vote because that's the way they felt at the time. I think AFSCME is strong. I think we're stronger in numbers and it makes us viable in the political arena today. And I think that's what someone way back when foresaw happening and...

FV: Who do you think that was?

EB: I would say Joe McDermott and, not Jerry Wolf, uh, our AFSCME president and I apologize, I can't remember his name!

EB: Yes! McNamee! Isn't it terrible to retire? I don't see him at meetings anymore. He doesn't do that little speech anymore. But they knew the importance of this even more so than... they were more experienced in knowing what the final outcome would be if we merged. Even though we didn't see it. And they tried but you know that's what our union is about. We're a democratic union. We have the right to think it out and disagree and maybe we're not so sure we want

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to do this and maybe all the decisions weren't popular but I think that if we were stand-alone and we were not part of AFSCME it also protected us from being hit by other unions. And we may be facing the same fate as some of those unions across the country but we're still strong as a result of it. So, I think it was a good decision overall.

FV: This is very good. People. The people in high places and low places in the union. Do you have any recollections of them, like McDermott or ... were you ever a delegate to any of these...?

EB: I was a delegate to every conference since 1982 except the last couple years when I retired. My last conference was in 2000.

FV: 1982 to 2000. A lot happened.

EB: Oh, there was a lot. You have to know that we have some really wild and woolly activists out there and if they don't want something, they're going to let somebody know. I found it was uncomfortable for me back when there was two men running for statewide president: Joe McDermott and Jimmy Moore. They were both... I liked them both and I saw a big split amongst the delegate body over that. Who was supporting and who was supporting. For me, that's uncomfortable, because up until that point I always felt that everybody was always going to get along.

FV: One big happy family.

EB: One big happy family. But it made us understand that such a thing could happen. A person could have different ideas and could go for it. Now, obviously, Joe won and Jimmy Moore is still active and everybody's back together again, you see. People get hurt, people don't always win their elections but you can't let those setbacks set you back because then you become less effective. They should make you stronger and you just move on. You just... I lost an election twice. And I was disappointed. That didn't stop me from running again and then I won my office the third time, so... and that was after not having been an officer for a couple terms. You know, you just can't let those defeats because people want to go places. And just because you want to try to do something doesn't mean that you shouldn't run because you don't want to hurt somebody's feelings. It's going to happen one way or the other. That's the nature of the political arena.

FV: Good. And who else? Any other personalities ... Irene?

EB: Oh, Irene. Irene was way before her time and she was the epitome of the beginning of the women's movement in CSEA. And she was my inspiration. She was a person who didn't take no for an answer like a lady. She could make a point so pointedly, "Now, you're going to listen to me. I want it this way." Not Irene. She was the gentlest, sweetest person you could ever know and one that you didn't want to fool with because she knew exactly what she wanted and she was going to get it. And she knew what was important and she was going to make them listen. And she did it in her own special way.

FV: What kinds of things did she get accomplished?

EB: Oh, my God. I think everything we deal with today started with Irene. Whether it was daycare or childcare or secretaries training. When they had training before they had officer training, but secretaries training wasn't

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included. A secretary was considered an officer probably because of Irene. I said one day, "Well, gee, I can't really do much back there. I'm just a secretary." "No, no, no. I don't want to ever hear that. You're not just a secretary. You perform a very important part." She made people feel that whatever position they held or whatever job they did they should be proud of that job and feel as though that job was just as important as a vice president at the college or the director at DOT. She made you feel as though what you did had worth. And that was especially important to women at that time. Because women didn't feel as though what they did was very important or valued much. They were made to feel... I told you, their jobs meant nothing. But Irene. She was my mentor.

FV: Yeah. Wow. Couldn't have asked for a better one.

EB: And I just think she is probably the most influential person in all the years that I have ... she is probably the one that I will remember forever.

FV: That's great. Nice to have your award and have her name on it. That's really special. Wow. That's good.

EB: I received three awards in my life. In 1986 I received the university's president's award for excellence in support services and I was very, very proud of it and you only get that once. And in 1996 region four awarded me the service appreciation award for the women's committee. And then it was topped off by the Irene Carr leadership award. I've got it made. My career was solidified by then. It made me feel as though I have made a difference in somebody's life somewhere.

FV: Of course you have. In many ways, I'm sure. And what's the membership of CSEA now? 165,000?

EB: A hundred and some thousand? Yeah.

FV: What was it 25 years ago?

EB: What, 30-40,000 maybe? If even then? And a lot of that's due to women.

FV: That's right, that's right. Absolutely. This is great. I've got some stock questions I'll ask.

EB: Uh oh.

FV: And if there's anything else that you remember that you want to tell us, we're here. We're here all day if you want to stay all day.

EB: Well, I do have a job. Even though I am retired I still have a job, three days a week. Don't do Mondays or Fridays.

FV: Good. That's smart. That's what I'd do.

EB: That's it. I work Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday. That's it.

FV: I did that for six years with no when I was doing CSEA commercials. I worked three days a week. Sometimes it was different days, but that's the way I wanted to do it. Practice for retirement.

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EB: Oh yeah. Well, see, I'm just kind of keeping this as my cash flow to take my trips and to build my own business because I'm working on that now.

FV: Good. What business?

EB: I'll be doing internet personal safety products. Especially for women.

FV: Excellent. Is this from what you've learned...

EB: Yeah, I've learned how to design web sites and I was going to do that a little but I'm kind of believing that people need to protect themselves and there's a lot of reason more so now to do that than ever before. So, I'm working on my marketing plan and I'm working on getting my funding. So, hopefully by the end of this next year my business will be up and running. Then no more part-time three days a week.

FV: Right. You'll be working all around the clock. All right. What are you most proud of in your CSEA career? I know there's a lot but let's try to pick out something...

EB: My three awards. Because I got that award at the university while I was still a union activist which proved one thing. Being a union activist did not deteriorate from my work. And so I do feel as though I was still awarded that in spite of what they tried to say that, you know, we just never do any work because we're always away at the union stuff.

FV: You've got something to show it.

EB: So that's what I feel is important.

FV: All the time you were with CSEA what are you most disappointed by?

EB: I would say the lack of some people who disagree getting on with it when the fight is over. There are some people who will hold grudges for years. And all of that makes everyone else uncomfortable but it also...When you have a strong union management can't buck you. When they find one person's in dissension with the rest they're going to work on that person. And I just find it's very difficult. I'm just disappointed that some people over the years just haven't gotten on with it. Because I'm the type of person that I got involved because I like people and I want people to get along and I also want people to be treated right. And I just think that the stronger we are, the more together we are. I know I get carried away. from the topics.

FV: No, I was going to ask you to define CSEA but I think you just did.

EB: Oh yes. As a whole, CSEA, I think, is one of the best unions around. I was privy to working for the phone company for a year prior to coming to state service and I was literally badgered into joining the teamsters but I didn't. But it was one of those unions that I felt at that time ran the people. I mean, you did what they said and I wasn't going to join. And then, fortunately, I got offered a job with the university so I left. I find this is much different. This is our union.

FV: Oh yeah. What lessons do you think CSEA's history holds for its future?

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EB: What lessons?

FV: Yeah, I mean if the past is prologue, as Shakespeare said, what are we going to learn from our past?

EB: Political action. I think that our early history, had politics played a part in it, it would not have resorted to just a social club in the beginning. They would have moved a lot faster. I think politics has been a very important phase of CSEA.

FV: Helped forge it.

EB: Yeah. I mean, I don't really like getting involved in political action. That's not my thing. It is for some people. So I leave that political action committee and all of those things to those people who like working on that. I was on the education committee. I was on other committees. I was the chair of our EAP program at the university for five years and I was a member besides that. And that's helping people. Helping people get the help they need and trying to keep them from going off the deep end. It's kind of like those were the things that were important to me. But I recognized that political action is extremely important and without it we won't have the clout that we have today. It's really important. And if you find somebody in there who is not going to support your issues then we've got to get our members to vote. So even though I didn't get involved in political action I voted and I did what I had to do, to do my part.

FV: Right. And the most important events in CSEA during your time of involvement? What do you think?

EB: Well, I have to go back to the issue of Theodore Wenzl on the stage. CSEA at that time was so sure we were going out on strike that in the lobby of the Palace Theater as we were leaving, the newspapers, the early editions were already delivered and it says, "CSEA goes out on strike." We didn't. And I'm sure that's why...

FV: Dewey defeats Truman?

EB: We defeated that. And I don't think they anticipated we had the know-how or the where-with-how or the whatever to be that strong to do that. So I think they gained mutual respect. The leadership gained mutual respect for the members in knowing that if you give them an issue when you tell them about it they're going to think about it and maybe make the decision. It just stands out. I ...

FV: This could be the defining moment in CSEA. The people said, "It's ours."

EB: Right, it may have been the defining moment in setting the guidelines that guide us today. You know, you can't take things for granted. And they took the members for granted. I don't think they're taking members for granted anymore. They have to deal with what the members need and want. And I think this was a good lesson they learned then. And I was very new and green and wasn't really extremely involved then at all. Just a shop steward doing some postings and helping out where I could. But I saw that and I thought, "Oh my God," you know? I can't believe this happened." And then there's this newspaper. I still have it at home somewhere, I think. It's so funny.

Interview with Ellen Burke

FV: Oh great. I'd love to see that.

EB: I even have the bumper sticker. They had bumper stickers. "CSEA on strike."

FV: Oh, good. Because that will go into the history ... whatever we publish...

EB: I'll have to look and see if we still have that.

FV: Please do. Yeah.

EB: Because I moved and a lot of stuff got tossed but I hope I didn't because ...

FV: If it's still around, make sure Steve can look at it because he and I and maybe you will be working on putting something together.

EB: You never know.

FV: It's very possible. You have a good grasp of the history of CSEA.

EB: Yeah and I'm surprised because I never really thought I did. I just did my thing and, you know, but that's a lot of years there. I think 1970, 80, 90, 2000. 35 years at the university, 30 years being involved as an activist is kind of a long time, I guess.

FV: Is there anything else I should have asked that I didn't ask that you wanted to talk about.

EB: No, I guess this isn't going anywhere, but if it were I would say to the members you need to keep strong. And you need to keep on fighting no matter how many stumbling blocks we're going to face these next few years because since 9/11 things are certainly not easy and they aren't going to be easy. There's a lot of retirements going on right now. They're not going to fill positions. Things that are already tough in the workplace are going to get tougher. And we just need to be strong. They need to be strong. I get a retirement check, you see. So I'm okay. I'm strong. But if I were still there, I would say, "You need to work together and you need to not give up and feel like its lost or feel like the union isn't doing anything because they are. It's a tough battle. And they're stronger than most unions across the country."

FV: Well, you are still there. Your spirit is there and you're there. You're still influencing people.

EB: Well, I try.

FV: It's great. Well, really, thank you much. It was a pleasure to talk to you.

EB: Thank you.

FV: I guess we're done, for now. But you, I'll probably go home and you'll think of more things and then you let us know because we'll do this again. That's what happens with this process, it's amazing.