

Interview with Elaine Mootry

FV: Someone already told me you're a woman of few words. So, I want the right ones. So I want you to start by telling me your name and the positions that you held in the union and any remembrances you're ready to tell us about and then I'll follow- up with more questions. Who are you?

EM: My name is Elaine Mootry and I've been active in CSEA since 1964 when I started to work for West Seneca Developmental Center. At that point, I held positions on the executive board of Local 427, which is West Seneca Developmental Center. I was on the executive board as a board member then I moved into the position of First Vice President and then into the position as President for several years. I was on CSEA's statewide board of directors. I also served on several negotiating teams, several committees, CSEA Benefit Fund. I was a delegate for several years from my local. When I became active as a board of member, I kind of dropped back in the local and became a delegate for CSEA.

FV: Um hm. So that's a lot of involvement. In 1964 you got involved in CSEA. What was happening in CSEA then, who was president of CSEA? Who headed up CSEA?

EM: The president was Wenzl at that time, I think.

FV: Did you ever talk to him or have any experiences with him or about him or hear about him?

EM: Oh yeah, experience as far as the negotiating team. Had delegate meetings.

FV: Tell me about him, what was he like?

EM: Cut the camera.

FV: Oh no! This is uncensored. Danny wants to know that instructions and outs and who did what to who and the real story so don't censor yourself.

EM: Well, I think he was kind of like a laid-back gentleman who allowed people, he delegated a lot of authority. He was an individual that many of us did not connect with because he was just like on a professional level and many of us who did the day-to-day groundwork didn't have too much involvement with him. I think I first really got to know Ted when I got on the negotiating team in 1972 and at that point, I wasn't too pleased with the way he was operating and the way he functioned as the CSEA president. And during that era also was the time when CSEA was going through a period of challenge with the professional people. The professional people thought that CSEA was not benefiting them enough and they had people come in to challenge CSEA and during that period it was my thought that he didn't contribute much to stop them from separating from CSEA. And at that time, we lost our PS&T unit.

FV: That was, when was that?

EM: I don't know, I can't remember.

FV: OK. That doesn't matter. It's on the record some place. So, you know, a lot of people have talked to us already about how back in that era it went from being a social organization to being a political organization. You saw that happen?

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EM: Yes. Yes.

FV: Tell me about it. How it happened and why do you think that happened?

EM: Well, that had to do with the organization as a whole. The older people who had helped establish CSEA originally way back when, there were a lot of older people who used CSEA as an avenue to, how do I say, fight for their rights. But they wanted to fight for their rights but still be like a little organization. They didn't want to become too labor oriented. They didn't want to be hostile at that point. There were just a lot of older people; a lot of professional people.

FV: Yeah. So how did it change?

EM: Well, I think that you had more of the, how do I say this without, you know?

FV: Just be frank with me.

EM: You had a lot of the blue collar workers coming through, OK? Originally CSEA was really controlled by a lot of professional people and you had a lot of blue collar workers that didn't feel that they were strong enough and really putting across the problems that the working class, the blue collar people were having.

FV: That's what a union is for, is to help those people.

EM: Right. Right.

FV: So what instituted the change? Who took over? What did people do to make this change? Who were they? Were you part of that?

EM: Not... What do you mean by "was I a part of it?"

FV: Making it go from a social organization to...

EM: Was I one of the key organizers?

FV: No but were you involved?

EM: Yeah, I was involved in my particular unit, which was the Mental Health deal at that time. And these were the people, the Mental Health people that were very aggressive at that time. They didn't feel that CSEA was really representing them properly, OK? And I think that when the professional people lost out and they were removed from CSEA I think that's when the social part of it decreased and it became more aggressive and labor oriented with the election of Bill McGowan.

FV: Tell me more about Bill.

EM: Bill McGowan? Um, I met Bill in 1965. We worked at the same facility. We worked at West Seneca Developmental Center together. He, along with George Fassel, was one of the reasons that I really got involved. He was a maintenance man there. I worked in the Direct Care unit and through my involvement with him on the unit. He kind of encouraged me to become more active and I did. That's when I started really becoming involved with CSEA and I was elected and I started traveling to conventions and workshops with Bill McGowan and I had a very excellent working relationship with him. At that time we used to...

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FV: Was there an issue that got you involved or was it just generally to be represented?

EM: There was an issue that I had with a particular supervisor. I came to work one day and I had a problem with the supervisor on my unit and I wasn't too satisfied with her response and so I went home and it disturbed so I couldn't rest and I wrote a letter to the Director of the facility and through that letter, I had a meeting with the Director and the supervisor kind of got reprimanded. From that day on, she and I did not have the best of relationships. So when things occurred, I had to call a union rep and Mr. McGowan was a union rep.

FV: So you saw the value of unions early.

EM: Yeah, absolutely, absolutely. I didn't think the Director would respond but he did respond and from that day on, that kind of remained with me forever. I didn't argue with her, I just put my thoughts in writing.

FV: Good. But then you realized you had something behind you. You had the power of a union.

EM: Right. Right. Oh, I come from-a steel mill. The power of a union has always been a strong force. Yeah, I'm from Lackawanna.

FV: Oh, really? Oh, OK. Bethlehem Steel.

EM: Yeah, yeah. My uncle was president of the on Bethlehem Steel for years. So, I knew when a town was quiet, it wasn't good. When the steel wasn't dropping, it wasn't good.

FV: So you saw the value of unions growing up. That's great. So what was your opinion of CSEA at that time as opposed to the steel workers. I mean the steel workers union had some power.

EM: You could. Yeah, -yeah.

FV: Did you get involved with CSEA in order to help change it?

EM: No. Not at all. Not to change the philosophy of it. I just got involved with it to actually, represent people. People who didn't feel that they had a voice. People that chose not to be represented because they felt that people would not support them.

FV: So when you had your representation, you started helping other people. What were some examples of things you had to do in those days. People would come to you?

EM: Yes.

FV: You were the shop steward in those days? EM: Yes, I was.

FV: So what would happen? I mean the mental health field, that's the toughest work there is, I think.

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EM: Um hm. Um hm. I'm not sure I understand you.

FV: Well, I mean what kinds of incidents, what kind of stories, what kind of people would you have to deal with?

EM: Oh, well there were time and attendance issues. Abuse issues. Accrual, people that wanted time off that were being denied unjustly. Out of title work issues. OK? A number of issues.

FV: Yeah. There was you but did you have field reps. Did they come from Albany to help?

EM: We had field reps that were stationed out of the region. FV: Anybody in particular you remember?

EM: Tom Christie.

EV: Tell me about him.

EM: Oh, Tom was, he was rather laid back. He was a good field rep. He kind of like listened to your issues, tried to help you find a way around them. He didn't just say, "OK. This is what has to happen." He kind of pushed you in and let you do the work and he was kind of laid back. Which gave you the opportunity to get experience even though eventually it didn't pan out for him but I learned from him. There was Vince...

FV: Did he work differently?

EM: Yeah. Vince was, he liked to be involved. He liked to keep his finger on things.

FV: It sounds like you're sort of like Vince it sounds like to me. You were pretty involved all the way through.

EM: Yeah. I liked them all. I didn't...I worked around them. I didn't want to get in the way of any of them having the ability to do their job.

FV: Right. So you'd bring the problems them and they would either help you or?

EM: Well, first you'd take it to your president who at that time was Bill McGowan.

FV: Oh, OK.

EM: Yeah. Yeah.

FV: So that was Bill?

EM: Right. And if there were issues which we couldn't control on a local level, we would send them up to headquarters. They had a labor management committee.

FV: OK. I'm just trying to see the development of your involvement in CSEA and CSEA as it grew and became more influential. That's basically what I'm looking for here. The people that you dealt with. You went to conventions. You went to Albany. What did you go to Albany for and what happened there?

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EM: On the executive board?

FV: Yeah. I mean what kind of issues are we talking about, I mean what...

EM: Over the years?

FV: Well, when you started.

EM: Oh, when I first started out?

FV: Yeah. And then how it changed. Where did you meet when you went to Albany?

EM: I'm trying to think.

FV: Was it Elk Street?

EM: Originally it was Elk Street, yeah; then we moved to different hotels.

FV: Uh huh. And who would be there and what people do you remember?

EM: Oh, I remember attorneys, Roemer, Featherston, Rice.

FV: What were they like?

EM: They were nice guys that had a little too much power in controlling the union. That's where it comes where Ted Wenzl kinda like let people take over, take control, where he had very little involvement and didn't truly understand what was going on. At one point I almost thought he was getting senile but that was just my thought. But yeah, you trying to get to the lawyers?

FV: Whatever you remember. I mean it doesn't matter.

EM: Yeah, I remember and even the staff, Bob Giles and, uh, a lot of the staff of the CSEA that pretty much controlled the union, OK?

FV: So it was a top down kind of control then.

EM: Right, right.

FV: But it did change.

EM: Yes, it did.

FV: That's what I'm looking for. Now McGowan was instrumental in the change.

EM: Yes.

FV: And you worked with McGowan so you had something to do with this.

EM: No, not really. Because I didn't agree with all of it. That's when McGowan and I kind of like grew apart.

FV: Oh! Tell me about that. What did you not agree with?

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EM: Well, at the time when they were trying to uh...There were several issues. One of the issues were decisions that were made at the executive board. Many of the decisions were whether CSEA would have their own law firm. At that time there was a lot of politics going on, a lot of elected officials fighting with each other, a lot of people fighting for control of the union. The big issue at that time was the legal staff. Whether the legal staff would remain or whether CSEA would have an outside law firm or an in-house law firm.

FV: Which side were you on?

EM: The out. I wasn't on the inside. It wasn't until a little later that I really realized the benefits of having the in-house lawyer. But, um, Bill McGowan and I kind of, at a convention in Syracuse, New York, we kind of like parted our ways because of the way things happened at that convention.

FV: What happened?

EM: Well, it was like it was done really underhanded. Like controlling the mikes. People standing up and taking over the mikes. A plan that they had put in effect, a plan that took away people's right to come together and speak. They did a real shabby thing. They just controlled the mikes. They were set on getting rid of the law firm, which for some reason Bill McGowan had some disagreements with. And at that point McGowan and I kind of like separated for a while.

FV: it's not because of what he wanted but the way he was going after it?

EM: The way he was going after it. And some of the issues were the issues with AFSCME, which was a big deal. Where Bill McGowan wanted to unite with them. That was a big issue too.

FV: You disagreed with that too?

EM: No, I didn't disagree with that one.

FV: Just the way he did things, right?

EM: Yeah.

FV: It was a matter of style more than substance.

EM: Right, right.

FV: But you had some input.

EM: Yeah, yeah.

FV: What did you do?

EM: What do you mean?

FV: Well that's a pretty open question. I mean did you...

EM: Well, you go back to your local and you tell your local what

positions you're in and how you voted and how you wanted them to vote. At that point I was the chairman of the Mental Hygiene and you know, you kind of got in there and you discussed issues and, it was just really political. People came out. I never suggested to people how to vote; I always gave them the information so they made decisions on their own. When you say I had some influence, I ...

FV: I mean the influence you had was in the central organization because you represented a certain number of people. How many people did you represent?

EM: At West Seneca Developmental Center?

FV: Yeah.

EM: At that time about three thousand.

FV: Three thousand?

EM: Um hm.

FV: That's a lot of people back then. How big was the union?

EM: Oh, I can't remember.

FV: Nothing like it is today.

EM: No. Many, many people.

FV: So three thousand was a good percentage.

EM: Yeah.

FV: So that's what I mean by you had influence. When you came to Albany or went to conventions you were representing a lot of people who had a lot of things they wanted done. What kind of things did you get done?

EM: Oh, jeez, that's a broad question.

FV: I know, that's why I'm asking it.

EM: Over the years, I don't know.

FV: Were there any big fights that stand out? You don't have to think of everything you did. Just think about the highlights of your CSER career.

EM: I think the law firm and the Niagara Falls, New York and I think there may have been Binghamton where meetings were held with...Whether the executive board had the ultimate responsibility in CSEA or the general body, the convention, the delegates, that was a big fight. That ultimately panned out in the legal system, OK. I was involved in that. I don't know. There were so many, many things.

FV: Yeah. That's a lot of years. You must have started when you were three.

EM: No, don't even TRY it! (Laughter)

FV: All right, so. Then Bill McGowan and you knew Joe McDermott obviously.

EM: Oh, yeah.

FV: Tell me about Joe. Everything you know. Everything you think is important for people to know about the history of CSEA. What was Joe like? Where did he come from?

EM: Joe was the vice president with McGowan for a while. He was kind of like in limbo because of the lawyer situation. They didn't agree on that so he was just like there for a while when he and McGowan...

FV: Biding his time?

EM: Right, right. Yeah, yeah. And he took over CSEA and he was very knowledgeable, very sharp. Very hands-on type person, very controlling person. Controlled staff and very political. Didn't hesitate to use his power when he had to and that included making appointments, breaking appointments, getting rid of people, you know. He brought the union a long way.

FV: Now, we talked about you didn't like McGowan's style. What did you think of McDermott's style?

EM: Well, Joe was OK with me. I liked McDermott. Because he had a grip on the whole union. There are some times when you get elected officials and they kind of like delegate too much authority and the people to whom they delegate the authority seem to think they can take over from the working class people. Well, he had a hold on that. He had his fingers in everything, which was good as far as the union people are concerned. You know, it's nice to have staff and have staff do their job but when staff start trying to overpower the members, then you have an problem. And he had his hands on that. He was very much involved in politics. He had a handle on that. Very much involved with AFSCME and, very knowledgeable person. But if you stepped on his toes, you could pay.

FV: Did you ever step on his toes?

EM: Oh no. I try not to step on anybody's toes.

FV: But you go what you wanted. How did you do it?

EM: Yeah. Well, I think honesty. If I had an issue that I believed in and I believed in it strongly enough, I stuck to it and nobody could change me if I thought I was right. The McDermotts, the McGowans, you know, if you're a friend of mine, I have a right to say what I want to say.

FV: Good. Well, that's the way you started and you just kept on keeping on.

EM: Um hm.

FV: That's good. Do you remember any other people that we should know about from your days in CSEA?

EM: You mean in the leadership role, the mental hygiene role?

FV: Any stories you have.

EM: The Dorothy Kings and the Betty Duffys of CSEA. They were all longtime warriors for mental health and mental issues and CSEA issues and they were people who fought very hard within their locals. You know, they were some of the original people with CSEA.

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FV: So, would you say women had a voice in CSEA?

EM: Very much so.

FV: Different from the general population shall we say?

EM: Very much so.

FV: Why was that? What was the philosophy of CSEA that allowed that to happen?

EM: I have no idea. Women just became more aggressive and more active. It had a lot to do with the workforce. I mean a lot of the workforces like the mental institutions and developmental centers, you know those were traditionally jobs that men did not hold because they were away in steel plants and all of that. And then all of a sudden steel plants and all started downsizing and you start picking up more men in the system. But way back in 1964, there were not too many men who were interested in working with mental patients or mentally handicapped developmentally.

FV: So that's a good thing then, that women had a strong voice in CSEA. Did that have anything to do with the way CSEA is today, those early days and women having a voice then? How does that work through history up to now in CSEA?

EM: I don't know, traditional jobs. You have the clerical field, you have the mental health system, you have the universities. I mean many of those jobs, those public sector jobs, are a lot of them are held..

FV: Now you have leadership. You have women in leadership. Did you get as far as you wanted to in CSEA?

EM: Very much so.

EV: Yeah? So there weren't obstacles?

EM: No. Not at all.

FV: What do you think you're most proud of in your time in CSEA?

EM: I don't know.

FV: Are you proud of anything?

EM: Of course I am!

FV: Well, what?

EM: Oh I kind of look back where I originally came from. My place of work, the developmental center. And the deinstitutionalization, OK? Something that was very difficult in the beginning. Trying to get your workforce to understand the deinstitutionalization. Trying to ward off privatization, in which the State was very much adamant about doing, particularly in the mental health field. I was in the developmental center where they had made up their mind that they were going to deinstitutionalize and the State workforce was just not going to be a part of it. And there were many people within CSEA, one gentleman right

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here out of Buffalo that I can remember so vividly. His name was Nick Stanton, who would come to the conventions year after year and get on the floor and he would make a long speech about the mental health system being destroyed and dismantled by a director that came from Pennsylvania that came into Buffalo Psych. I cannot remember his name at this time. But many of the people at CSEA at the convention floor kind of like shoved it aside and he would come so often and say the same thing, he was boring them all. But he had his finger right on the issue and what had happened. And we all started getting involved in it and we all started seeing parts of it with Commissioner Miller. One of the things that I had to do was go back and take a look. Because you can get on one side and you had to take a look at it from the other side and say "Look, you know maybe this guy's got a point here. Maybe we'd better look at it." And when OMRDD started taking a look at the same thing, only they were more into privatizing where the State of New York, the mental health system was into the dumping field, we had to take a look at that. And I, myself, met with the director of my facility, who at that time was Dr... and we had a long discussion. And he made a commitment to our executive board that he felt very strongly that he could not control the State of New York downsizing. But before he would let anyone out of our facility, he would demand that the State workforce go with them. OK? Then it became my job to encourage my members to take advantage of that which was not an easy job. They were just as institutionalized as the clients. We worked on that and we worked on that and today as you look around in OMRDD, the service provided to developmentally handicapped individuals, you can't beat the service out of New York State. It's wonderful. Clients have gotten into group homes. Behaviors you thought could not ever change have been changed. They have become more accepted by the communities and they're living wonderful lives. And many of our employees, you couldn't drag them out of a group home today. Many of them are waiting on a list to get into group homes. And that particular director, because he violated, they removed him. He had to resign. Because he kept his commitment to take the workforce with him.

FV: Well, that's a brave guy.

EM: Yes, he was. Hosella, his name was. And I think that was a turning point for the whole State of New York. He lost his job but he proved that it could be done. With the State workforce.

FV: That's great. I'm glad to hear that. Now, on the other side of the coin, what are you most disappointed by in CSEA?

EM: When you talk about disappointed? I think when I compare CSEA with other unions and the fact that members have such a strong voice in this union, I don't think that I could say I'm disappointed about anything with CSEA. I may have been disappointed with some individuals but as far as the union is concerned, I think CSFA has been a wonderful union. I really do. And compared to the union dues, I look at my grandchildren today and where they work and the type of dues and the representation, hey, I can't say that I'm ever disappointed in CSEA.

FV: Great. Good. That's nice to know. Now you said a couple of things that...
(End of Tape)