

Interview with Nick Palacino

NP: My name is Nicholas Palacino. I've been associated with CSEA, believe it or not, for over 50 years. I started way back, and that's going way back. I went to work for the State of New York when I left the service. I was discharged from World War II; I'm a World War II veteran. I went to work for the State of New York. At that time we had no contracts, we had nothing and there was an organization around they called CSEA but it was more of a social setup. Well, first of all, the dues I was paying were 10 cents a week or something and somebody in the office came around and collected, you know. I was very reluctant to join any organization without knowing too much about it. But anyway, I became involved and after a while, we formed locals in each division in the State of New York and I became active in a division of employment, the Department of Labor, as a grievance representative. So I worked for the State of New York on a temporary job for twenty-three and a half years. My involvement with CSEA; I met quite a number of people in CSEA and at one point I was approached and asked if I would be interested in serving on the staff of CSEA as a field representative. At that time there were no field representative; now they got a fancy name, Labor Relations Specialist. So I then had to make a decision after twenty-three and a half years of working for the State whether I was going to retire and join the staff. I made the decision and I vested my rights with the State because I wasn't old enough at the time and I became a staff member with CSEA. Well, I had a career with CSFA of twenty years and then I decided uh...At that point, while I was on staff, I was very fortunate because I was assigned in the Long Island area, which was near my home, I didn't have to relocate. As a matter of fact, that's where I met some of the most wonderful people I ever...I was assigned to the psychiatric, I always remember this and I always got to give these people credit. When I went to work servicing the psychiatric centers, that's Central Islip, Pilgrim, Kings Park, I learned that the people that work in these places are a different, I don't want to use the word breed, but these people were dedicated people. You had to be dedicated to work there so I had a lot of respect for those people because they worked hard under very, very bad conditions. But I saw CSEA grow from, at that point they were like a paper tiger. We had the potentialities but we never utilized...I attended a convention at one time as a delegate where somebody got up and said that we ought to change our name to CSEA Union and I think three or four ladies collapsed because they thought that was a terrible thing. But I'm very happy to say that I've seen the change in CSEA from a paper tiger into one of the most forceful and great unions in the State of New York. And they did a tremendous amount of good for our people. I know because I worked for the State and I know that we didn't have no rights at all until we finally got a State contract and we were at least heard. And this is what, when the Taylor Law was passed in 1968 and I went to work for CSEA, one of the hardest jobs we had was sitting down with administration that they had to talk to us. You see, up to this point, they only spoke to us when they felt like talking to us. But now they were required by law and we danced around quite some time. And during that time, as I said before, I was working in one psychiatric unit where they had some problems with the local there and there was an election. And some guy got elected who wasn't even on the ballot. It was a write-in vote and he won overwhelmingly. Well, the night of the change, the winner came in the room and, and I know he's gonna strike this out. He had on a pair of sandals with no socks, a pair of short shorts. Now he's a big guy. And a T-shirt. Now here was the new president, and a cigar in his mouth. The first thing I did was sit down with him and said "Now look, you're representing," at the point Central Islip had maybe 3,000 employees, so I said "and you gotta look like an executive and act like an executive, you know, 'cause they expect a lot from you." And the man has amazed me because he's made such a tremendous stride and I'm so proud of him that I think of him as a son.

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I really am proud and every time I look at him, I just feel good. That's all, and he knows it. Do I have to tell you who I'm talking about?"

FV: Yeah. Tell me.

NP: It's Danny Donohue. Danny is just one great guy.

FV: Well, he dresses better but he probably hasn't changed much in other respects, has he?

NP: Right. Yeah, I always take him out to lunch. He never takes me out to lunch. You know, at one time, when I first broke him in, we were together for so long his wife thought we were keeping company, you know? But he has a wonderful family and a wonderful wife and I've seen his family grow up. And he's proud of them and they're doing a fine job. Well, anyway, enough praise. See, I don't want anything. When I retired from CSEA I wanted to keep myself busy and active because under the retirement, if you don't keep you're mind active, you fade away. So my first outing was, I did some volunteer work as an ombudsman for the State in the nursing homes but I just couldn't take the atmosphere there, it was so, I just couldn't do it. So I attended a retiree meeting and that was another fatal mistake I made. I attended a retiree meeting and the officers were so happy to see me and they asked me to get involved and I said that I would like to get involved in a limited way but first thing you know, I was on the executive board and right after that, of course, the president stepped down and so they asked me to be the president. So I've been serving as president of local 919 in Nassau County, the CSEA retiree unit. At this point we've built up our membership. We have over 4200 members. So it keeps you hopping and it keeps you answering the phone. But I wouldn't trade my experience with CSEA for anything in the world. I met some of the most wonderful people in the world, all types. Well, like I said the last six months have been a little bit rough on me but they carried me through and that's where it's been a help to me so I am very, very grateful to CSEA.

FV: Let's go back to when you were a field rep. That's what they called it then, right?

NP: That's a field rep.

FV: Yeah. I think that's a good solid...

NP: I thought so but somebody got the idea to make it more exclusive.

FV: (inaudible) or correctional institutions now too.

NP: And custodians, you know.

FV: But what are some of the grievances that you had to deal with back in those days, when you started?

NP: Well, one of the grievances that I always enjoyed was, in Kings Park State Hospital, it was located, was located, it's now been closed, in a very, very beautiful area. The ocean is there and everything. These were isolated spots thirty or forty years ago but now of course, it's very closely built. But the area where the hospital was built, it's such a beautiful area and in order to attract employees, they gave them some perks. One of the perks, I

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always remember this, was a boat slip. They had a pier there and these people were given a boat slip based on the fact that they were employees of the hospital. Well, this was the sort of a perk that nobody wanted to give up because it's almost impossible to get a slip out on the Island now. But so at one time, the State said "We're going to close it down to you employees." We filed a grievance and the grievance was that this was a benefit that was given to the employees and we didn't want it removed. Well, we met and Danny and I went to a lot of hearings in Albany and we finally got the State to withdraw and the people were allowed to keep their slips. The only problem was they didn't want publicity. They told us, you know, don't go around printing something that you won a big case because a lot of people objected to the fact that some of these employees had slips. And P.S., to this day, those people still have those slips even though the hospital doesn't exist anymore. So we were happy about that.

FV: No givebacks there.

NP: No giveback, no. Well, that was another indication that if you don't have somebody fighting for you...

FV: That's the philosophy of a union.

NP: That's one that, I remember. There was quite a few. I had some very comical ones. I once defended somebody in Central Islip who came to the hearing and he was being accused of stealing in the kitchen. So I met with this gentleman early in the morning and I said, you know, "What happened?" "Oh," he says, "it's very simple." Held been working there for years. "I finished my shift. I don't drive so I get picked up. So I was waiting for my ride and I put my coat on the bench, waiting for him. When he came I just jumped in the car and I picked up my coat." What he didn't tell me was that there was a 20-pound frozen turkey in his coat. So I says "You've gotta be kiddin'. You want me to go in and tell this to the arbitrator, that you weren't aware of the fact that there was a... ? He says "I swear, I didn't know!" That's another one. Another one I had was very cute, also in Central Islip. The head of the security force came to me and says "Nick, you know, we got a guy that's been working here for 35 years. Here's the problem. He came out the other day and it was very hot in July, but he had a hat on and they were watching him for a while. So when they called him outside they said. 'John, we'd like to talk to you.' And they were talking to him and as they were talking to him, the guy starts sweating and then butter came running down. He had butter hidden in his hat. These are some of the things you can't forget."

FV: How did he get away with that? Did you defend him successfully?

NP: Well, we negotiated. You know, he lost one day. I mean this was 40 years, I mean he probably was doing that, I don't know.

FV: ...that one incident. But getting back to the guy with the turkey. Did he eat the evidence?

NP: (Laughter) That's right, you know I never did find out what he did with the turkey.

FV: Did you get a leg or anything? (Laughter) But you defended him successfully, right?

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NP: Yeah. Yes, yes, yes. He didn't lose his job. We got him a little suspension. Next time I got to a hearing, the fella's being brought on charges for sleeping, he was drunk. He comes to the hearing, whew, smelled like it was...I said "Did you have a drink this morning before...?" "Well, no, I was drinking last night. I just had to brace myself up." I said "We can't go in there." I mean, he IS being accused of being drunk! We re-scheduled it. He comes back again, he's drunk again. So these are some of the things you think about and you laugh.

FV: But I get a feeling though that I know these people put up with a lot and, of course, they didn't all burn out a lot sooner than they did working in the psych center.

NP: That's right.

FV: But don't you think they were taking things because they felt like they were owed a little extra here, a little extra there? Because of the way they were treated? I mean, what was the story? What was life like then?

NP: Well, you don't steal a 20-pound turkey because, you know... But, milk, you know, that's stuff they throw away if they can't use it. You know, I could see it. It's like, you talk about that. I also serviced the Farmingdale SUNY College, it used to be an agricultural. Now they had farms and they would have chickens. That was another famous case of mine. That remained in my memory anyway. The president at that time was a fella named Cipriani who was a wonderful guy. They had a farm with chickens and they would get eggs. They had plenty of eggs and they used to sell them to the staff at a discount price, which was very nice. Now, the president one day went down to get some eggs and there were no eggs. So, since he was under instructions from his wife to bring home eggs, he went to town and he went to the local deli to buy eggs. When he gets there, he finds stacks of Farmingdale eggs there. The guy that was taking care of the chickens was selling the eggs. So, unfortunately, the guy who was in charge of that happened to be the president of the local in SUNY Farmingdale. But we got him out of that one too. So those are some of the memories that keep coming back.

FV: Great. What about some of the, you got to know Danny, but who was president when Danny was moving up when president was statewide? Did you ever meet people like that?

NP: Oh, yeah, sure. Ted Wenzl. Wenzl was a strange fella, very nice but he... I always remember him. I was walking a picket line in front of CSEA because the staff, we went on strike.

FV: What, here?

NP: Not here, in Albany.

FV: In Albany, oh.

NP: Yeah. 33 Elk Street at that time.

FV: I remember that.

NP: And it was on a hill like this. Well, believe it or not, we were walkin' a picket line and we all wore out a pair of shoes because of the fact that you had

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to go up...But anyway, we'd be out there early in the morning picketing and Wenzl would drive up on a bike, he'd ride a bike from his house. But he was a good president. He was a gung ho guy. I mean the guy that I admired and I thought was Mr. CSEA himself is Joe Lockner. I think Joe Lockner was one of the main reasons why CSEA became successful.

FV: What was Joe Lockner?

NP: He was the executive director but he ran the staff, he did a tremendous job. I had a lot of respect for Mr. Lockner. I thought he was wonderful. Then he finally retired.

FV: When was he active?

NP: Oh, well, when I joined in 1968, '69 and 1970, I think.

FV: You spent a lot of time in Albany.

NP: Well, back and forth, yes. Well, and another thing, beside being the president of local 919, I'm the only retiree on a statewide PAC committee. In other words, it's my responsibility to make sure that any bills the retirees are looking to have pressed, that CSFA does it and they've been wonderful. I go up to the meetings and they accept the fact that the retirees are part of our organization.

FV: They have more experience.

NP: Yeah, yeah. And, you know, remember, they're gonna be retirees some day soon too, you know? So that's the reason why. No, I find that keeping active that way keeps me going. Like I said, especially in the past couple of months I've had a little difficult. But I feel that they've helped me tremendously.

FV: You've got a great support group.

NP: Yes.

FV: Let's go back to the past for awhile. Lockner, what kinds of things did he do that you... ?

NP: Joe Lockner was Mr. CSEA. I mean, he was great with staff. He knew how to use staff and he utilized them. He was a strict guy-But he just was good. I had another supervisor Jerry Rogers, who worked very closely with Joe Lockner. That was the crew at that time. The gentleman who approached me asked if I would be interested in working for them. But Joe Lockner, you know certain people carry themselves in such a way that you always feel like they're good, you know? You get a feel for them.

FV: I feel that way about Danny. I just think he cares about people.

NP: That's exactly the right way. He does care. One of the things I had to convince him when he first took office in Central Islip was that you know, there are people and there are people. There are people who are not on his side and you gotta understand that 'cause not everybody is like you. So you got to watch out who your friends are at all times. I think he learned that lesson. When I heard him speak at the last convention, AFSCME convention, and he stood right

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beside MacAntee and Gephardt and Hillary and he came across just as good, if not better than some of them. So it does give you a sense of pride that I contributed just a little bit to the organization and to people like that.

FV: That's the philosophy of CSEA isn't it? Everybody helps everybody. You were in a good position to see that and do that.

NP: Right. Because I started from the beginning when we didn't have any rights at all. I mean we had situations in the hospitals there. Those people were working. If the director saw somebody walking across the lawn and he didn't like them, he'd say "Fire him" and they'd fire him. So that was a terrible way to work. And we didn't have health insurance and stuff like that, which is the A, number one priority for retirees.

FV: Absolutely, All right, let me see. We went from...After Wenzl was president then it was McGowan?

NP: McGowan, yes. McGowan was all right. He was around a long time as executive vice president or something so he was good. He had some good ideas. I was one of those people who wasn't too sure when we merged with the AFSCME because they were our competitors all the time when we had elections. And we had some rough elections. I remember one election we spent on the grounds of Kings Park. I rented a trailer and we slept there that night, which was very good. The state allowed us to bring the trailer in and we passed out our stuff. I mean the other union had the same rights but I don't think they ever took advantage of that. We had a big trailer there so we made a big splash. We did win the election but then we lost the...But McGowan had some excellent ideas. But I think the biggest thing that he did was associate us with AFSCME. I think that was the smartest move because in the long run, we benefited from our association with AFSCME.

FV: Well, now that you're partners, you don't fight each other too. Right?

NP: Yeah. The other way, we were just spending money and on elections they would challenge, we would challenge and that entails a lot of legwork. You talk about legwork. You see that, see, things come back? I remember we were recruiting part time workers in Jones Beach and we actually went there on a Saturday morning and walked across sand dunes because these part time workers were all over the place. So we were tracking them down and giving them cards. And we recruited quite a few of them. But that was another adventure into the sand dunes. You know, sometimes you say to yourself "What am I doing here, you know?"

FV: Wherever they are, that's where you've got to go.

NP: Yes. That was good, that was good. Yeah. When we went to Jones Beach, you know there's a tollgate there. So the president, I don't want to name him now. It wasn't Danny. The president of the Parks Department local, he went through because he had an employee, he went around the tollgate. But he told us, "Oh no. You guys got to go through the tollgate." And I thought "Jeez, that's strange." We're talking about a quarter. But he was strict.

FV: You can name him.

NP: Lou. He's now in Florida and he's not doing too well. But we had some good memories. Fond memories.

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FV: Now, you were around when the Taylor Law came in.

NP: Yes, 1968.

FV: How did that come about? Were you part of any of that?

NP: Well, we were pushing for it. Most of the public employees were enthusiastic about it and we had a lot of backing. And you've gotta make phone calls and that's the one thing that people don't understand. You know, it's not done by two or three people, it's done by everyone collectively making phone calls. And you need a lot. I talked to a lot of politicians and they keep tab of the phone calls they get and they know that as seniors or retirees, we vote, you know what I mean? And that's why we're so strong politically, because our people are the big ones.

FV: OK. Let's see, we talked about Wenzl, McGowan. McDermott.

NP: Oh, Joe.

FV: Yeah. Tell me about Joe.

NP: Joe was, he was good. He was a quiet guy. He did everything very conservatively. The staff respected him. He was kind of stern all the time and he wasn't over-friendly. He never did any harm to us anyway.

FV: All right. What would you say that you're most proud of with CSEA?

NP: Well I feel that I was a little part in building the organization. I contributed not only my time as a staff member but as an activist even after retirement because it's very important. And the fact remains, in Nassau and Suffolk County, we have over 9,000 members and I know that the Suffolk County local has as many members as we have. People keep in touch with us and we sometimes have to answer silly questions but you know that's part of the game. You've got to take the good with the bad. If you enjoy doing it, I've always enjoyed working with people and maybe that's good or maybe that's bad but it's kept me going, believe me.

FV: All right. On the other side of the coin, what would you say is your biggest disappointment with CSEA? If you have any.

NP: Biggest disappointment? One of the things that I, I don't want to get political though. It's not a disappointment. I tried to explain we have I think, 65 or 200,000 retirees and the conception is "Oh, retiree. He's got a lot of time. He can, you know, call them up. If you need a picket line you get..." You can't do that. You can't do that. These people, most of them have their own problems. You know the old joke about the guy who was in the nursing home and the girls are talking and they say "You know, Mary's going out with..." Can I tell a joke? It's clean. "Mary's going out with Jack." "Yeah, is he a nice-looking guy?" "Nah, he's not nice looking." "Has he got a lot of money?" "Nah.", "Is he a good lover?" "Nah. He's a terrible lover." "Well, what the heck does she see in him?" "He's the only one in the nursing home that drives at night." So, you see, you can't get through to these people. Only the other day I got a call where the call was going to be at Levittown Hall at eight o'clock at night. I called some people. You know, you can't get these people to go out after eight o'clock. So we have our monthly meetings during the afternoon and we

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get a good turnout. I don't know if it's because we give them bagels and coffee but they turn out.

FV: So, how often do you do that?

NP: Once a month.

FV: Here?

NP: No. Levittown Hall. We go to a local place. Levittown Hall is in Hempstead.

FV: Same day of the month every month?

NP: Yes.

FV: What day?

NP: The fourth Tuesday of the month.

FV: The fourth Tuesday, huh? Maybe we'll show up.

NP: We got a meeting April 23d.

FV: I don't know if we can make it then but

NP: And the last meeting would be May 21st. If you call me I'll give you the instructions.

FV: Who knows. We might.

Unknown speaker: I'll be in Las Vegas in May.

FV: Then there's always June.

NP: No. We don't meet in June or July. See that's another thing, they don't meet during the heat. June, July and August. Then we go back in September.

Unknown speaker: September we'll be there.

FV: September. OK.

NP: Oh, we used to meet in June. We used to have a picnic. But you know what, we don't have able-bodied guys to handle the beer, the soda, the cooking. It's a big problem. And one of my problems is trying to convince Albany that you can't rely on the retirees because they have the impression that these people have a lot of time and they're willing to donate it. Well, it's not SO. I found out anyway. And all the other locals have the same problem I have.

FV: Well, maybe listening to this, we'll give it to them again. All right, what do you see as the most important event in your involvement with CSEA? I mean it's 50 years but there's a lot.

NP: Well, of course, the Taylor Law, to me was the biggest thing. Because as a public employee, I had no health insurance, I had no retirement. I mean, it was all Social Security. To me that was one of the biggest breaks that the public

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employee got. And as time goes by, you find that it is one of the most important things. They had no rights, they had no holidays. They had nothing. To me, that was the highlight. Another terrific thing we found, I think it was in 1972 when we had a State contract and we actually went on strike one weekend. We went on strike. That was very interesting, to see who would get up and be counted and that's where you know who's what and why. And I was very gratified because we had a terrific following and they all turned out so the strike ended over the weekend. But that was quite an experience.

FV: I'm sure there're pictures of that.

NP: Oh yeah. Picket line and we had a good turnout. And what's even better was when we had hearings for each one of these employees that was brought up under the Taylor Law. Well, we didn't lose one case. So we had a good attorney at that time. Lester Lupkin was our regional attorney and we worked together and we spent days at hearings, you know.

FV: Sure.

NP: But evidently our people said the right things. So we won all of our cases. Nobody lost any money. Not that I advocate strikes because nobody wins in a strike.

FV: No but sometimes.

NP: You have to stand up to be counted.

FV: All right. Let me ask you one question. I'll give you more time if you want it. But let me ask you this. You have a lot of history with CSEA, you've learned a lot with CSEA, you've fought a lot for the people you represent. What lessons do you think CSEA's history holds for it's future?

NP: I think they're heading in the right direction. First of all, they've now started to take in private employment. And to survive, that's what you have to do. People like to see staff out in the field. And they've increased the staff to the point where at least they can represent the people. Because people are funny. They want attention all the time. I mean, as a retiree, we have very little benefits coming to us. But the calls that you get, you know, sometimes they pay 12 dollars yearly dues and they expect health insurance, they expect, they expect dental insurance. You know, so you gotta explain it to them and if you don't have the patience...But I think CSEA is heading in the right direction. In order to survive, they're gonna have to expand and that's what they're doing. And the future is the big thing and unions will be around a long time.

FV: Good. I'm glad to hear that. Glad you think so. Let's talk about some of the other people I talked to today. You may have memories of Rita. Rita Wallace?

NP: Rita Wallace?

FV: Yeah. What do you remember about Rita?

NP: Rita's a good person. She's a hard worker. She has a funny way of getting across to some of the people as far as I'm concerned. Is this being recorded?

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FV: What do you mean?

NP: She's rough. She's a rough person.

FV: Yeah? She gets what she wants?

NP: Not all the time.

FV: Does anybody ever?

NP: I mean there's a way of getting something, you know what I mean? And she used to rub too many people the wrong way.

FV: So, were you at some of these battles?

NP: Uh, no thank goodness, I wasn't involved with Rita's local. But, you know, from what I heard, she uh...

FV: Yeah, yeah. All right. What about some of the recent people they elected? Like Nick, Nick LaMort.

NP: Nick LaMort is one of the best things that happened to this region as far as I'm concerned. I've seen what he does, his involvement. I've been to conventions with him and he gets involved. He treats the retiree locals like they're part of the organization so he's respected by a lot of people. I was fortunate enough at the last Washington meeting with AFSCME to visit numerous officials and congressmen and they were all on a first-name basis, which is something good. He has got a good rapport whether it's Democrats or Republicans. So I think that he's doing a tremendous job so I hope he continues. But sometimes I tell him "You know, you're pushing yourself too thin, not in weight, in time." His weight he's got to watch out just like Danny.

FV: But you have respect for people who represent CSEA. With the politicians and different people. Don't you think?

NP: Oh, you definitely feel that. Oh sure. Oh, I really think SO. I could walk down the street any time and one of the proudest things I have is that I can walk into any State facility and meet people and they acknowledge me and they come over to me and to me that is the greatest thing. I've had that happen to me a number of times. We were in Hawaii at the convention and I'm walking with my wife and people came over and thanked me for past services as a field rep and told my wife some very nice things that I was surprised. They appreciate the fact that you're a human being and you respect them. This is what I tried to teach my sons.

FV: Does it make a difference?

NP: It makes a big difference in your life, believe me. FV: And you make a difference in people's lives.

NP: Well, I hope so. I hope it's a plus anyway. You know, you don't have much time left and when you don't, everything is important to you, everything.

FV: Well, you know, I've asked you all the questions I can think of. You got anything else you want to tell us before we uh... ?

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NP: I'll probably think of a lot of things.

FV: Then we'll come back. NP: Nahh!

FV: No, seriously, we'll come back in another month or two or maybe September and we'll do this again. We try to stimulate a lot of memories. So if you think of things, write down a little note and keep a list and we'll come back. But if there's anything now you want to say...

NP: No. I really appreciate the opportunity to express myself and to express my gratitude for CSEA because they changed my life. My family's life too cause I sent two boys through college; I've got to admit that. But there were times when things were bad but, hey you gotta take the good with the bad.

FV: Yeah. Well, we really appreciate it. And I'm honored that you had the time to talk to us. I really am.

NP: I appreciate the fact that you gave me the opportunity.

FV: Thank you very much.

NP: You think I'll ever see that?

FV: Yeah, I think you will.