

CSEA HISTORY PROJECT

JUDY RICHARDS INTERVIEW

4/13/05

INTERVIEWER: Judy, why don't we start out by just -- tell us, you know, your full name and what your association has been with CSEA; in other words, what -- how long have you been a member, where you worked, that kind of thing?

MS. RICHARDS: Okay. My name's Judy Richards and I was a member of CSEA for 27 years. I started off in the Department of Law in 1967 and then I went to SUNY Empire State College and I was the vice president for six months and then my president decided I was doing such a wonderful job that I should become the president, so she resigned and I became president. I never had any opposition in all the elections, and I was president until two years ago when I retired.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. Do you remember when you first became aware of an association called CSEA?

MS. RICHARDS: As soon as I walked in the front door of SUNY Empire State College. They -- the Human Resources Department gave you a packet and I had no idea how large CSEA was. I went to my first convention at the Concord in

the Catskills and I thought I was going to maybe like a Holiday Inn for a meeting.

And I was shocked of the organization, the many facets of CSEA, and I thought what a challenge this is gonna be, and I just got very excited because I'm a people person and I felt that they should have a fair share and a fair shake in the workplace and I became involved. And my dad was a laborer and was in the union and I guess maybe that was why I decided to become involved.

INTERVIEWER: What year was that when you went to work for --

MS. RICHARDS: '67.

INTERVIEWER: -- Empire State College?

MS. RICHARDS: Well, it was actually '68 because I started in '67 at the Department of Law and I was only there less than a year.

INTERVIEWER: Okay.

MS. RICHARDS: And then --

INTERVIEWER: And so fairly early on you got active within --

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: -- the organization?

MS. RICHARDS: Yep. Within the six months of me coming into the front door.

INTERVIEWER: H-m-m. What was that first convention like?

MS. RICHARDS: Overwhelming. Very overwhelming. I was like the new kid on the block and I didn't really have a lot of exposure, so it was a very learning activity for me. I felt I did develop a network of people. People were very willing, reached out to you, were more than willing to answer any questions that you had about anything. They were just there for you so you didn't mind giving your time to them because they were giving their time in return for help to the membership and to yourself as an activist.

INTERVIEWER: M-m h-m-m. What -- what was the mix of people like that you remember?

MS. RICHARDS: I don't know. I guess I can't remember. It was quite a long time ago (laughter). I felt that everybody was kind of on an equal level. I mean the staff people were there putting on workshops and they were like

right -- right at the same level that we were. Their interests were there for the membership like we were. I didn't feel intimidated at all. You talked to a lot of people. You learned a lot of things and I just felt very comfortable. I was overwhelmed but I was comfortable and I didn't hesitate to pick up the phone and call anybody to say, well, what did you mean by this or how do I do that, and they were just always there and I just felt good about that.

INTERVIEWER: Do you -- why did you join CSEA when you -- when you first came in the door? What was the incentive to you to actually become a part of this?

MS. RICHARDS: My dad said you have to belong to a union to be protected and I said, well, what do you mean? I had to take a test to get in here, and he said that doesn't mean anything. The union will be there for you, and I guess it was from my dad pushing me, and he always taught me if you're right, you open up your mouth and if you're not right, you sit back and you listen and then you -- then you open up your mouth.

And my mother always said, it's from your father where you got where you are because you did listen and you opened up your mouth and you fought for your members and for yourself.

INTERVIEWER: Now, do you remember in that time frame the first State contract?

MS. RICHARDS: No, I don't. I don't remember it at all.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. What do you remember about contracts being negotiated when you -- does that start to --

MS. RICHARDS: Well, I remember my first salary was like \$3000 and I thought that was a lot of money back then and I was real excited and I felt it was probably the best that they could do. I really -- like I said, I was a little bit naive but I was willing to step up to the plate because you have to start somewhere.

And I didn't really get involved in negotiations because working in the State government there was only one contract. It was not like at local government levels where you negotiated, you know, with the administration there. But I don't remember any of the

particulars except that my salary was \$3000.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. Those must have been, you know, times where it was kind of like a continual growth --

MS. RICHARDS: M-m h-m-m.

INTERVIEWER: -- with CSEA? What do you remember about, you know, how you got more involved and how you saw the organization beginning to change, particularly in the early seventies?

MS. RICHARDS: Well, we started gettin' involved with political action. We started doing picket lines; informational lines not picket lines. And I just kept going to more and more conferences and workshops to become more knowledgeable in different aspects of what CSEA was all about and I just tried to apply that information and then I tried to get other members to become involved.

And unfortunately at my workplace there was mostly women and they were pretty skeptical of getting involved because they were always afraid, quote, they were gonna lose their job if they stepped up to the plate, and I tried

to convince them and I think I was pretty successful because in the end, most of my officers and most of my activists were women. I had just very -- maybe a handful of men that worked in our mailroom and our supply room, but Empire State at the time when I was working were mostly women.

INTERVIEWER: How did you see CSEA change in terms of the way woman were treated in the organization through that time frame?

MS. RICHARDS: In the organization or as an employee?

INTERVIEWER: Well, I mean, I know that, for example, in the late seventies Women's Committee was created and there seemed to be more of a, you know, a recognition of --

MS. RICHARDS: Right.

INTERVIEWER: -- the need to address issues that women were bringing to the table.

MS. RICHARDS: Well, I think Region IV, the Capital Region, was the first region also that had a Women's Committee. We were kind of like the pilot program and at that time I actually was a regional officer and we felt it



wasn't just women's issues, because there were many men that were also at home and there were issues that not only were effective towards the women, but they were also affecting men and we just felt that these were issues in a whole that needed to be addressed.

But foremost most of the heavy weight landed on the woman, but there were some issues like day care and that type of thing that men were involved in also, specially when most women and men had to have a two-income family to survive.

INTERVIEWER: M-m h-m-m. Okay. What -- what do you think of when you think back over the last 30 years or so? What do you think of as the significant events that affected CSEA as you saw them?

MS. RICHARDS: Oh, dear. Well, contracts obviously. Health care.

INTERVIEWER: M-m h-m-m.

MS. RICHARDS: Job security. Day care. Safety in the work places. Health benefits.

INTERVIEWER: Well, while we're

talking about safety, do you remember the fight to get the Public Employment Safety and Health Law passed?

MS. RICHARDS: Yes. Yes. And at Empire State College I think we were one of the first SUNY campuses that brought some attack to the State because there were some violations and we were successful in our little role that we were trying to -- point that we were trying to bring across to them.

INTERVIEWER: M-m h-m-m. Was that an issue that it was -- it was easy to get the members involved in standing up for that issue?

MS. RICHARDS: Mostly the committees were the people that were behind most of the movement and the change. On the local levels I found that people would come to a committee and talk with them but then they wanted the committee to be the spokesperson for 'em because they didn't feel they had enough knowledge to express their interest themselves? So in my particular case we had our committees mostly do the speaking for the membership.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. Do you remember

the fight over the PS&T unit leaving CSEA?

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah, I do.

INTERVIEWER: What was that all about?

MS. RICHARDS: Well, their -- they were -- officially they wanted to come with us and they were in more of a technical group of employees like nurses, technicians and stuff, and the marriage, as people would call it when they came with us, for a long time was good and then they felt, well, maybe we should have broken away from again and gone back because they felt that they could have negotiated when they went under PEF better contracts and stuff.

And I had mixed feelings about that because I felt, you know, we were all under CSEA and I felt maybe the classified service situation could have been looked at differently, the Department of Civil Service, to keep those people. And when they broke away I think we lost a lot of strength when they left us.

INTERVIEWER: And, I mean obviously that was a pretty significant blow to the organization --

MS. RICHARDS: Yes.

INTERVIEWER: -- to lose as many people as we did all at one fell swoop.

What was the reaction among the membership when that happened?

MS. RICHARDS: I think they were disgruntled a lot because, again, over the years with CSEA with contracts and local government before agency shop, we lost a lot of people and then when we lost PS&T there was more people gone and we started seeing our numbers dwindle and our strength wasn't as powerful, and then we went into AFSCME and thankful for AFSCME, they were there for us for support when we needed them.

INTERVIEWER: And what do you remember about that affiliation? Were you involved in the ratification of that?

MS. RICHARDS: Yes. At first there was some hesitancy and there was a lot of questions about it and what we were gonna get. I guess that's always somebody's question in their mind: What are we gonna get if we give them so much money?

And people were hesitant but I thought

after like the first couple of years, then they were more comfortable, and I think to this day I think now people still have mixed feelings, but I think that AFSCME has proven to be a good partner to CSEA and I think people really need to get involved to understand the whole organization because they just see money taken out of their paycheck and they don't have a clue why it's taken out.

And I think there needs to be some more marketing or more communication somewhere, whether it's at the local levels or its from CSEA to make people become aware of what really is happening and what services really are out there because I don't think people really understand the whole organization. They just see -- their funnel of attention is just their immediate funnel where they're working, their work location.

INTERVIEWER: Were you part of that ratification meeting, the story when McGowan brought the board -- were you on the board at that time?

MS. RICHARDS: No, I was never on the

board of directors.

INTERVIEWER: Okay.

MS. RICHARDS: Never was on that board.

INTERVIEWER: I mean do you remember -- as you said, it took a couple of years for people to sort of get comfortable with the relationship with AFSCME.

What do you remember about the -- how that proceeded? Did they come out and do meetings? Did they --

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah, they had informa...they had informational -- they had informational meetings. They did 'em like in the Capital Region and in the other regions. I am not sure if they did a satellite conference or not, I can't remember, because we did use satellite conferencing for different events like contract negotiation, ratification and stuff. But I don't quite remember if that was one of the particulars that we used.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. What -- what do you remember about Bill McGowan?

MS. RICHARDS: His cigar.

(Laughter.)

MS. RICHARDS: Bill was a feisty man. He fought like hell for the membership and I think he respected him for it. I think he was a good leader and I think basically that's what I remember about Bill McGowan. You could go up and talk to him and feel very comfortable and, again, I think most of the leadership with CSEA, you can talk with them and you just have to get over that barrier that you think it's them and us. It's all one. We're all one union and I think people need to start feeling confident that, you know, they're here for our best interests and you need to come forward and stop sitting in the back row of the theater and come forward and get involved. Because if you don't get involved you don't have anybody to blame but yourself.

INTERVIEWER: I should probably have taken a step back when I started that line of questioning. How about -- I assume you had some contact with Ted Wenzel?

MS. RICHARDS: That was my very early days on and --

INTERVIEWER: Everybody laughs --

(Laughter.)

INTERVIEWER: -- before they answer about Ted Wenzel.

MS. RICHARDS: Well, I remember with -- the biggest thing I remember about Ted Wenzel, like I said, it was my early days on with CSEA. We were having a meeting and I know it was in Albany but I can't tell you where and he got very upset over a question that was asked him and I don't remember the question, and I thought he was gonna go over the top of the table at the person that was there.

He was only there like a short period of time and then Bill came in, thank the Lord, but I -- I don't have a comment one way or the other about his leadership because I wasn't really that involved with him at that point, but Bill McGowan, Joe McDermott, Danny and those were the presidents that I've dealt with over my 27 years.

INTERVIEWER: Did you have dealings with Tom McDonough?

MS. RICHARDS: Not really. Again,



like I said, sometimes I stepped back a little bit but why, I can't tell ya, but I didn't have any problems talking with Bill McGowan and then I started getting on statewide committees and stuff and then I had worked under Joe when he was the regional president, as his regional secretary, so I felt very comfortable speaking with him.

And Mary Sullivan I love. I could always go to Mary Sullivan for answers and I just -- I guess you gotta feel comfortable in your spot, in your role, as to who you can speak with.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. Tell me about Irene Carr too.

MS. RICHARDS: Irene Carr was my mentor. Irene taught me as the regional secretary my first time I was elected, I had been 15 years as a regional secretary, to never feel intimidated that you're not part of the meeting. You need to speak out and partake. Don't just be a secretary, don't just take minutes, and actually Irene and I did a little travel show together and we went into the

regions and we did training together way back when because I was in the Capital Region, and so we went into the locals in the Albany area and did training together and she was a marvelous lady, a marvelous lady.

And very laid back and just took the bull by the horn in her calm little way and when she wanted to say something, you knew what she was trying to say, but very, very professional the way she did things.

INTERVIEWER: What -- you know, obviously it's difficult to generalize about CSEA but I think that in the -- in the Capital Region in particular, because of the concentration of State employees here, that that's sort of what is unique to the character of the organization here.

I wonder if you would talk a little bit about the culture of State employees in and around the Capital District?

MS. RICHARDS: Well, I came from Saratoga so I was kind of considered the North Country. The culture in Albany, I think, ethnically carried a lot of different diversity

and I think over the years you started to see more and more people become involved, first on the local level and then in the regional elections and people have moved on.

I think they don't see a barrier like they used to see and I think there's been a lot of unity within the different diversity in the Capital -- I think across the state, not just in the Capital Region, and I think people are reaching out more because they know we're all here for the same reason and that makes me feel good because I think people need to work together, no matter whether it's CSEA or a community organization or a labor temple or whatever it is.

If you don't reach out, you can't do this job by yourself and that's how I look at it.

INTERVIEWER: It seems like there, you know, one time in the organization, maybe still true to an extent today, but the issues were a little different.

But there was a stronger social component to what the union was, you know, or

why people got involve --

MS. RICHARDS: M-m h-m-m.

INTERVIEWER: -- in the union?

MS. RICHARDS: M-m h-m-m.

INTERVIEWER: Did you see that in the  
-- especially in the early years?

MS. RICHARDS: I think under Teddy  
Wenzel that was the social part of it because  
that's all I saw. I didn't see a lot of  
activity helping the State employee or the  
county employee.

When Bill McGowan got in and Joe  
McDermott got in and Danny, I think that whole  
picture changed. I think people realized that  
we mean business. We're not here just to have a  
drink and a dinner and we have to work hard, and  
I mean work hard, to get what we need and what  
we deserve as State employees and public  
employees.

And I think we have to say thank you  
to those three men that, you know, weren't gonna  
take any crap from the Capital and they worked  
hard for us and we were behind 'em and the  
numbers were there and we all got out and worked

for the same cause.

INTERVIEWER: If I recall correctly I think you ran for statewide office --

MS. RICHARDS: Yes, I did.

INTERVIEWER: -- at one time. What were the challenges of running on a statewide basis? I mean obviously you had some standing here in the Capital Region as a region officer but I would assume that it was -- had to be a unique challenge to run on a statewide basis.

MS. RICHARDS: It was a very difficult task. It's a money situation, I think, and actually it was Irene's position that I ran. I felt it was time and I -- I was kind of overwhelmed but I thought I had to start somewhere and I really enjoyed being the secretary and I wanted to get more involved statewide.

And unfortunately I lost and then I ran a second time and I only lost by one percent so I just kept pluggin' and I just thought, well, you know what? Maybe it's not my time and I just think the unfortunate part for a little guy is you don't have the contacts. You don't

have the ability to go out because, as you know, when you're elected for a statewide office, it's the whole entire CSEA in the six regions, and I just think they have an upper hand, that the incumbent has an upper hand, and -- but if you believe in something you just gotta fight the fight as -- whatever tools you have and just go for it and maybe you'll get lucky.

I don't know, but I don't resent or regret the fact that I ran and I lost. I felt proud that I got as many votes that I did across the state and if I had to do it again, I might do it again.

INTERVIEWER: What -- can you think of something that you would describe maybe the -- the -- one of the best things that -- of a story or something that was one of the best things that happened to you in CSEA and then I'm gonna ask you about the worst --

MS. RICHARDS: Okay.

INTERVIEWER: -- thing that happened.

MS. RICHARDS: I think the overall best thing with me with CSEA is the many friendships and the networks of people that I've

met over the years that truly were there in personal times, in work times, and I'm -- just like I said, I'm a very much people person and I knew I made a lot of contacts with a lot of people and my willingness and their willingness to give me any kind of advice or, you know, challenges and just kind of push me a little bit and say, well, you can do this, and come on, come on board with us and join the committee or do somethin'.

And they gave me a little bit of self-esteem when, believe it or not, sometimes I was not quite sure of myself and I thought: You know, what's the worst thing that can happen? Okay, so I'll volunteer, and I thank those people for all that advice and time and staff people included, you know, and I enjoyed my years in CSEA very much.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. I don't wanna be a downer, but what about -- what are some of the worst things --

MS. RICHARDS: The worst time --

INTERVIEWER: -- experiences that you had?

MS. RICHARDS: I think the worst times were I guess it's called politics, when you knew one side of a person and they were your friend and then they were the friends of somebody else and then you get into a debate of an issue or a candidate or, you know, an endorsement and hard feelings are brought to the surface and you just really -- if you're not the kind of person, I think you have to put the friendships aside and gotta look at the situation and say, well, this person or this situation, the ending result is the best for the membership and you have to get to that point, and sometimes people can't.

And I just think sometimes we have to put aside our differences and look at the overall picture and not take things so personally and I think people have a tendency to take things personally and it's unfortunate because then you lose the momentum that they're gonna stay involved because they're thinkin', well, Mary's mad at me because I voted this way or Johnny's mad at me 'cause I didn't endorse this person and they -- all this hard work that everybody put in in the organization just gets



blown outa the water and the members lose. It's not just those two or three people or group of people. The members are the ones that lost in the end.

INTERVIEWER: Seems like there's always something new to learn about CSEA. What has surprised you over the years that -- that you've learned about the organization?

MS. RICHARDS: I don't know if I had any surprises because in the end I became very involved in statewide committees and stuff and then I was a nonvoting member on the board. I don't know if I can think of anything.

INTERVIEWER: Okay. Why do you think CSEA has been able to endure for a hundred years?

MS. RICHARDS: Commitment. Commitment, the ability to have great leadership; not only elected but people that are willing to give up their time and half their life to continue to fight the fight with everything that they have and, you know, the State of New York is gonna be here, I think, for a long, long time and bein' the Capital where

everything happens, I think CSEA is gonna be around for a long, long time.

INTERVIEWER: Anything that you'd like to add?

MS. RICHARDS: No. I'm just the new kid on the block now for the retirees and I've got more new things to learn.

(Laughter.)

INTERVIEWER: That's -- that will be a challenge ahead of you, I'm sure.

MS. RICHARDS: Yeah, 6000 members. Yet --

INTERVIEWER: Right. That will cover us.

(Conclusion of interview of Judy Richards.)

