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INTERVIEWER: MARY ANN JOHNSON
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MAJ: This is Mary Ann Johnson, and I'm talking to Helen Ramirez Odell, and it is June 27, 2014, and we're here at the CAWHC office. So Helen, let's begin with a little background. Can you tell me about where you were born, and where you grew up, and maybe something about some of the major influences on your life when you were a young person?

HRO: Yes, and I'm happy to be here, Mary Ann. I was born Helen Marie Hershinow in 1942 at Jackson Park Hospital in Chicago. And I guess my parents lived for a year or so in one of the new housing projects that had started in the city, but they quickly decided that this was not what they expected it to be and moved to the North Side of Chicago, so I grew up mostly in the Lincoln Square area.

I grew up in a very traditional way. My father was a machinist at Teletype, which was an AT&T company, for my entire life, until he retired. And my mother, before she married my dad, she did a little secretarial work, but once she married, then she was a full-time homemaker. So I did have a brother, my brother Bob. He's about three years younger than me. And I also have a developmentally disabled brother, Paul, who I'm legal guardian for, and he's now in the Kiley Center in Waukegan, and I look after him as best I can.

But I was sent to Catholic schools, and when I grew up the choices were really pretty much teacher, secretary, nurse. What I really wanted to be was a journalist, because I went to Immaculata High School, and I loved my journalism class. But I was very much aware that once you got a job at a paper, you were relegated to writing the gossip columns, the homemaking columns, the fashion columns—I didn't want that. [*Laughs.*]

So my second choice was nursing. It was traditional. It was a traditional role, but it was what I wanted. And Loyola was offering a college degree instead of your three year diploma, School of Nursing, and my parents were very big on education. They really wanted me to get that college education. They sacrificed a lot so I could go there. And I did. I loved my four years at Loyola.

And I started working in the hospitals when I...well, I got married a year after I graduated, and I was working at the hospitals for a short time, but when my daughter was born, I knew I could not keep up with the hospital schedule, the rotating shifts, it's impossible to get a babysitter. My marriage was already falling apart, so...yeah, I divorced after being married only about a year.

And through the American Nursing Association, they urged me to apply for school nursing, so that's what I did, and it turned out to be the perfect fit. We were called teacher nurses then. I had my B.S.N., I had my R.N. I had to sign a contract to go for all of the graduate level courses to become certified as a teacher nurse—or we were called teacher public school health.

And I worked in the poorest area of the city on the West Side. I had to learn a lot because I was dealing with a different culture. But as I say, I loved working in the schools and it's what I did for over 40 years, until I retired then in 2011.

MAJ: Wonderful. You want to tell me a little bit about your experiences working on the West Side? Where did you work?

HRO: First I was assigned to elementary schools. I had Gladstone, Ethan Allen and Brainerd Schools, all of which are gone now. The Ethan Allen School, when it was closed, it became Simpson. It was an alternative school for pregnant students. And that was one of the schools where I worked at, too. I started an exercise program for the girls there because they weren't allowed to take PE. And that was a big deal just to get the exercise program started.

And after I had worked many years for the Board, then they put me in the high schools. I worked at some of the worst schools, some of the best schools. At one time I was getting a little...I had two extremes. I had Cregier, which was the lowest rated school in the city, which closed, and I had Whitney Young, which was the first magnet school, and Whitney Young became my main school. I was there once five years full-time when they closed Spaulding, the school for handicapped students, but usually I had more than Whitney Young, and the last few years I was cut down to three days a week there because I had to give one day each to charter schools.

All the nurses, all the other clinicians—social workers, psychologists, speech pathologists—we were just all spread too thinly. But I loved working with the students, and it was always a challenging job. And promoting their health, identifying health problems early, helping families take the steps to remedy them as much as possible, and also planning educationally so they could do their best with whatever health issues they had to deal with, that was our goal. We wanted our students to be successful.

MAJ: What was your first experience with social activism?

HRO: Oh. Well, what really changed my life was the women's movement, the feminist movement, and the labor movement. I guess it was when I was going through a divorce. You have that moment that changes your life? Well, I had mine. When my husband and I split up, I was afraid we were going to be evicted from our apartment because, I mean, we had the new baby. Obviously I couldn't work for a few weeks and he was not working and refused to get a job. I was afraid we would be evicted with our stuff on the street.

So I left. I actually moved in with his parents for several weeks. I didn't want to be out on the street. And then his family helped me find an apartment. But I needed some furniture for the apartment. I was able to get very little of our furniture where he still was, and I had no kitchen chairs. So I went to Goldblatt's to try to buy some kitchen chairs, and you know how you can put some money down and get them?

Well, Goldblatt's wouldn't let me do that unless I had my husband's permission. And here I was the one bringing in a paycheck. I had started my job at the Board of Ed. He's bringing in no money, but they would not let me buy these kitchen chairs on time unless I had his signed permission. I was furious. I cannot tell you. So it was that moment I became a feminist.

MAJ: And what year was this?

HRO: This would have been in the late '60s. It was in the late '60s. I joined NOW. I had read about them in the newspaper. Was it Kathleen Connelly? I can't remember the name of the person quoted in the paper, but all I did was send in my dues to become a member, and I guess I started getting a newsletter, but I don't think Chicago had really started their chapter then. But I was happy to be a member, and yeah, that's... And then, of course, NOW did get started in Chicago, became very active fighting discrimination on all kinds of levels, and we started working very hard for the Equal Rights Amendment, so that became a focus.

At the same time, working in the schools...when I was working in the hospitals, nurses had no voice. There was no union for nurses. You did what you were told. And it didn't matter what the nursing shortage was, if you did something that displeased management, they would fire you. It was like a revolving door at the hospital. There were so many nurses that came and left. That kind of shocked me. If you were even talking to a nurse, some—I remember being stopped and told I should be given a can of Ajax and cleaning a cabinet. And this was in the 1960s.

So things were so different when I came to the schools. When I came to the schools I didn't have to work evenings, I didn't have to work weekends. My salary was higher as a new teacher—remember, we were teacher nurses, we got paid on a teacher salary schedule—my salary was higher than it was even after working the two years at the hospital.

And Chicago Teachers Union was getting ready for its very first strike, because the teachers hadn't had a raise in many years. And I'm not sure exactly what the issues were, but even my supervisor at the time said that she did not expect me to go to work if there was a strike, and she urged me to join the union. So that was my awakening. There wasn't a strike then. The board decided to settle just with the threat of the teachers doing it.

But it wasn't many years after that that we started to have several strikes. And it was in the early '70s that in order to save money, the Board thought that they would get rid of the whole health program, just lay off the teacher nurses and not have any kind of a health program at all, or do what they could through the city. So the nurses had to organize to save our program, and it was really the first time that we as nurses got together as a group.

We had to decide who would represent us—did we want Chicago Teachers Union or did we want the Illinois Nurses Association. We decided to Chicago Teachers Union. They helped us organize. INA, Children's Memorial Hospital, all kinds of organizations helped us save the program. But that was kind of my baptism into organizing and what could be done.

MAJ: And were you successful?

HRO: We were. We saved the program then. And there have been other times down the road where we've had to get together to save it also. Often when you get new leadership and they want to save money, they don't understand the health program, they don't understand the services that are given or why they're needed, and they think this is a good way to save money, so us getting them educated, getting them to change their minds is often a challenge.

MAJ: And why did you feel like the health program was so important?

HRO: Because we were the only health professionals in the school, and not only...since we did have a couple of schools, usually, it wasn't very often a nurse was full-time in the school, but we were the ones who identified the children who had health issues and really helped family remedy them before those health problems became so bad they would interfere with school.

We didn't have special ed when I started nursing, but later on it became a major, major thing, especially when we had that public law passed that every child is entitled to a free and equal public education, no matter how severe their disabilities. So we were the ones who would do the planning for that so their health needs could be accommodated at school. Sometimes they would need home teaching, sometimes they would need modifications made to what they took in school, but we were the ones who did all that.

We would often provide immediate care, we would give medications when they had to be given during the school day, and we would do a lot of health teaching. Preventing health problems was a big part of what we would do, and immunizations. We were the ones really responsible for making sure our children were immunized. Otherwise communicable disease that could be prevented by vaccines spreads like wildfire through the population. So we were the ones who made sure our children were vaccinated against polio, tetanus, diphtheria, and measles, mumps and rubella.

And I can tell you, we used to have a big program for hearing impaired students at Whitney Young. Once children started getting the vaccine to prevent measles and rubella, many of those students had hearing losses because of complications of measles and rubella, and once it went through the population that they were vaccinated and we didn't have those diseases, we didn't have as many children entering the programs with hearing impairments.

MAJ: Interesting.

HRO: Yeah.

MAJ: So you were involved with the Chicago Teachers Union at this point, and how did you get involved with the Women's Rights Committee?

HRO: Well, since the late '60s, early '70s, I was elected to represent the school nurses as a union delegate, which I did, you know, worked on getting contract demands, getting nurses organized to plan for what we wanted. And that's a big point I wanted to make, too.

What I did find out, and really learned through our union, it's quite one thing to complain about things, it's quite another thing to be able to name what you want, how you want a situation resolved. And you are powerless unless you're able to state what you want. And that was challenging with the nurses. Nurses knew what was wrong, but to get nurses together to be able to state what we wanted was often very challenging in terms of contract demands or professional problems meetings.

MAJ: And why do you think that was so difficult?

HRO: That's a good question. I wish I could give you a good answer. But finding the words to say what we wanted—I mean, we're not...most of us were raised in traditional feminine ways, where we do the bidding of other people, and that's certainly what the role of the nurse had been. But to have a voice of our own, to state our own thoughts and feelings and what we wanted, that was a new learning experience, so that was part of empowering ourselves.

So there was the work with the nurses, but I became very active in NOW, especially working for the Equal Rights Amendment. And I was a member—the Chicago Teachers Union formed a Women's Rights Committee in the early '70s, and I was active on the committee at first because we were trying to get things changed for pregnant teachers. At that time, if you were pregnant, you were forced on maternity leave your fifth month, which was about the time you started to show, and you weren't allowed to come back until your baby was a year old.

Also, your health insurance would not cover maternity care unless you were in a family plan that you had to arrange for. You had to be married and you had to apply for family care at least nine months before the baby was born. So our

main thing, though, was the maternity leave. At that time we thought when a woman goes on maternity leave should be up to her and her doctor, and when she comes back after the birth of the baby should be up to the woman and the doctor, not have these arbitrary rules. So we did have the federal anti-pregnancy discrimination law passed in the early '70s, but to get that enforced at the Chicago Board of Education was quite a project, but we did it. *[Laughs.]* So that's how I got involved.

And then...well, let's see. We had two chairs before me. The first chair we worked on pregnancy, and then I really got more active in NOW, and wasn't so active on our Chicago Teachers Union committee, especially when there was a lot of focus on getting tampon machines in the bathroom. I mean, sure, there was a need for that, but I couldn't get as excited over that as I could changing pregnancy discrimination.

So the second chair worked mainly on passage of the Equal Rights Amendment, and I worked on that, too, somewhat with my union, but mainly with the other feminist groups. But when she took a job with the Illinois Federation of Teachers, then Robert Healey, who was president at the time, appointed me the chair, so I came on in 1984. I think that they thought at that time that the Women's rights movement was dead. ERA was down the tubes. We had done all we were going to do. But I didn't see it that way at all.

And I had a good committee. They welcomed me. The chair, who was leaving for another job, brought a cake. All the women wanted to work with me. And so we wasted no time getting started. I'll tell you about our very first project, which I thought would be easy, but turned out to be much more difficult than I thought. Our union contract, which we called the Agreement, had very sexist language. Every teacher, every clerk, paraprofessional was a she. The administrators, the people who ran the board, were always referred to as he. It was very sexist language, and I wanted to get rid of that.

Now you would think that would be a very easy thing to accomplish in a teachers union, but I would bring it up at the House of Delegates meetings—I would have to make a motion, it would have to go through the House, and we would have several hundred people at those meetings. And at that time, even though union members were about 70-75% female, well over half of the delegates were male. Some of those men were dead set against any change in the language, and while I would be at the mike arguing for it, they would come up and argue against it.

That was when I realized how powerful language is. It not only reflects social values, it also shapes social values. So what I was doing in trying to get rid of the patriarchal language was shape the equality, and a lot of our men, who could be very progressive in some ways, were very, very much opposed.

We did finally prevail, and we worked on the contract for many months to show how it could be done by using plural. We didn't want to use he/she. We used plural and just did it in other ways. And the union secretary was tremendous in getting it accomplished. But finally we did, and we wanted the union newspaper also to have the gender fair language, so we did finally accomplish that. So that was my first adventure as chair.

MAJ: Let me ask you something. Why do you think the men were so opposed to changing the language?

HRO: Well, because then it was less patriarchal, and it was change, it was progressive, and they liked things as they were, and I think they saw it as a threat. And I didn't realize that a change in language could be so threatening until I learned how powerful language is.

So almost at the same time, we got involved with the women at Washburn. At that time the Board of Education had one postsecondary school. It was Washburn Trade School, where graduates of high school went to learn a trade. They had pipefitting, plumbing, electrical working, carpentry, chef, air conditioning, heating, just all kinds of trades. And since it was a women's movement, women started to want to get into the trades.

Well, apparently they were having a very, very hard time getting into Washburn Trade School, and if they did manage to get in, they were not treated very well, so they filed a lawsuit. We heard about their lawsuit. It went through the EEOC that they were discriminated against upon admission. Once they got in, they had to deal with sexual harassment, a lot of unfair treatment.

Anyhow, the committee took this up. It was a major concern, but what to do, what to do. We wanted to help these women, we wanted to show we sympathized with them, we supported them. But it was our brothers, the teachers at Washburn Trade School who were being called on the carpet.

So the first thing we did was just write a very carefully worded letter of support to them through their attorney. And I worked days on this letter, and I did get the okay of President Robert Healey before I sent it. I knew that was important. So they knew in writing, not just the informal word of mouth, that we were indeed on their side and wanted to see some change.

So we were trying to figure out how we could be of help, and we thought the one thing we could zero in on was sexual harassment, which at that time was just being recognized as a problem, was just being given a name. So the first union that I knew of that had done anything about it was American Auto Workers in Detroit. And the head of the women's department there—her first name was Dorothy, and I should know her last name.

MAJ: Haener?

HRO: No, I don't think so. But anyhow, they had done a film. It was called "Would You Let This Happen to Your Sister?" That might not be the exact wording, but it was pretty close. And I had met her through the Coalition of Labor Union Women, which I became active in as soon as I became chair of the Women's Rights Committee. So she let me borrow the film, and we invited the union delegates from Washburn Trade School to a Women's Rights Committee meeting so we could talk about sexual harassment and show the film.

And glory be, they came. They even came...they did have a female assistant principal there, and she came, too. So we at least got started talking about it, and they agreed that, yeah, this was a problem, and they certainly did not—what word am I looking for—certainly didn't endorse it or want it. So how much they meant it, I don't know, but at least they said it.

So the next thing we did was write a resolution for our next union convention saying what sexual harassment was, and that it would not be tolerated in any of our schools, in our workplaces or in union offices. And we managed to get that passed in Chicago and at the IFT. Now I dare say—you know, I had a lot of people quite hostile on this at the House of Delegates. There were guys in there who would be giving me the finger when I'd get up there and talk. But most of the people there were very reasonable, and certainly the women delegates and most of the men were supportive, we did get it passed.

So getting a resolution passed, of course, is just a beginning. That's recognition that there's a problem and work needs to be done educating people to stop it. And then we made a lot of educational efforts to educate our own members, make sure new employees at our union were educated in sexual harassment. We even prepared kits for them. We gave programs on it at some of the union conventions. And we worked with Washburn Trade School. I think I brought in someone from Michigan who was just wonderful getting curriculum on sexual harassment to work with the staff at Washburn to start a program there. So that was our contribution there.

But I guess the other aspect we wanted to work on was getting school guidance counselors to encourage female students to go into these trades, or go into nontraditional jobs, to study nontraditional things, so we did a little work there, not a whole lot, but it was certainly something that we promoted. And women in the trades, Chicago Women in the Trades with Lauren Sugerman were just terrific then. They were doing wonderful work. So that was a big project for us. Yeah, that was the second big project.

But so much was happening. It was also in the early '80s that we realized there was a gender gap in the way that men and women voted. We were really waking up politically to the power that we had as women when it was time to vote, and we got much more involved in elections. And I'm not sure just when it was that Geraldine Ferraro was running for vice president, but certainly we...we even had an event to raise money for her which she came to. That was

the Women's Rights Committee and also one of the staff people on the union who was our liaison staff person. We got involved in that.

So I guess the next big issue that came up was women in sports. [Laughs.] Yeah. So the women in sports, that was in 1986. I have never been much of a sports fan, never much involved in sports except for a little tennis, a little jogging. But I happened to come across a copy of a *Reader* that had a lengthy article with Dorothy Gaters. Dorothy Gaters was the coach of the girls basketball team at Marshall High School.

And I was absolutely shocked, when I read it, at the terrible conditions she had to go through, or deal with just the girls to practice, just to get the use of the gym. And when she had a state winning girls basketball team, when they came back victorious, there was absolutely nothing for them. When the boys came back victorious, there were bands playing, and parades, and the city just going all out for them. Absolutely nothing for the girls. So I just thought that was shocking, and we invited Dorothy Gaters to come to one of our meetings so she could talk about it, which she did. We also had a coach who taught volleyball.

And not only did we want the conditions in the schools to change, but we found out that as a union group we could really just represent employees, and not students. But we found out that things were much different for female coaches than they were for male coaches. Male coaches could work with ninth, tenth, eleventh and twelfth grades, and work umpteen hours. The female coaches could only work for pay for eleventh and twelfth graders and they had limited hours. So we wanted that equalized.

So it was not just our committee, but it was also our Physical Education Committee in the union, the PE teachers were organized, our high school committee, they had a committee. We all got together, and in the next contract we got those hours equalized, we had the frosh-soph team started, which certainly benefited the girls. The conditions in the schools we could speak out on. I don't think we were able to accomplish a lot, but just getting that changed in the contract or the Agreement was a major accomplishment.

And Dorothy Gaters, up until...well, this is 2014. I'm not sure. I think she retired in the last year or two, but she continued to coach a prizewinning team and really nurture those girls on the team for decades.

MAJ: And this was at Marshall?

HRO: This was Marshall High School, yes. Marshall High School. Another major project of the committee was promoting the teaching of women's history. And I think it was in the early 1980s we had Women's History Week, which then, in 1987, became Women's History Month. So how do we promote that? That was another challenge.

So what we did was we wrote a little brochure—I have a copy somewhere in that file—it was just a little trifold brochure about some women in history you should know, with a word puzzle and some activities, and a picture on the front, and we distributed that at a union meeting, and we also offered it to teachers through the union paper. We had to print and send out 10,000 of those so they could be used. And the National Women’s History Project asked for a copy that they could use, which we were happy to send for them. The farther it went out, the happier we were.

So we also started to set up a table in March at the union delegates meetings, which, as I said, drew several hundred people, and we would sell women’s history items that could be used in the classroom. They all came from the National Women’s History Project, which was the forerunner, and they gave us a nice discount, which I really needed, because then we were able to sell it to the teachers at the discounted price, and they bought, because they were getting a bargain. They bought and they used them. The discount, in later years they weren’t able to sustain it, but by then there was a lot of work going on in so many areas, but we felt good we got things started.

MAJ: That’s great, yeah. Okay, so are there other things you want to talk about about the Chicago Teachers Union?

HRO: Yeah, yeah, yeah. Okay, I did say that we got active in politics.

MAJ: Oh, yes.

HRO: If you remember Senator Alan Dixon, we were very angry at him because he not only failed to support the Equal Rights Amendment, but he also was not supportive of Anita Hill in the sexual harassment suit, and when he was up for reelection, we did not want him reelected. In fact we were ready to dump Dixon. That was the slogan.

And one day NOW was arranging a Dump Dixon rally, I think down by the Chicago River or something. Anyhow, we adjourned our meeting early so we could all go down to the river, or wherever it was, to publicize and march and hold up our signs, it was time to dump Dixon. And that’s when we got State Representative Carol Moseley Braun to run for Senate, and as you know, she won. We did, indeed, dump Dixon.

MAJ: And it was because of your protesting?

HRO: Well, we were just a small part. We were a small part of it.

MAJ: It was a whole movement at the time?

HRO: Yeah. Yeah, yeah, yeah. But we were good to be a part of it.

MAJ: Do you know what year this was?

HRO: I think this was 1988. And we loved Carol Moseley Braun because she helped us get pension credit for our teachers who had been on maternity leave. Female teachers usually didn't get as much of a pension as the male teachers because of time out for having children. And the men who took time out for military service, they were able to pay into the pension fund and weren't penalized because of the time out. But women who took time out to have children, those years just didn't count.

So we started gathering petitions and we wanted...changes in our pension have to go through the Illinois legislature, so we needed a law passed so that teachers who had been on maternity leave could pay into the pension fund and then get credit for...well, we started out we just wanted one year.

And Carol Moseley Braun is the one who really did that for us. She met with us at Ann Sather's Restaurant over on Clark Street and we presented her with the petitions, and she promised that she would work on getting that legislation through for us, which she did, with the Chicago Teachers Union lobbyists and all helping. So we got it for one year, and some years later it was extended for two years, which I think is equivalent to people in the military.

MAJ: And it stands today?

HRO: It does stand today, yeah.

MAJ: Was Carol Moseley Braun a senator at that point?

HRO: No. This was when she was still... This is why we were so eager to campaign for her to become a U.S. senator, because she had done such good work as an Illinois representative. So I don't know how much time we have, so I won't take a—you tell me.

MAJ: Plenty.

HRO: Oh, okay. [*Laughs.*] All right. Also that very same year, 1988, was when the Coalition of Labor Union Women had the American family celebration in Washington, which was really a big event with women from all kinds of unions and other organizations there.

We were calling for...we not only wanted family and medical leave, we wanted paid family and medical leave, we wanted single payer health insurance. We were just starting to recognize that women had health needs that weren't being recognized or adequately addressed in our health system, so we wanted the equality there, so it was a big, big thing.

And our union, both in Chicago and on the national level, got very much involved in the women's health movement, and the reproductive choice movement, coverage for birth control. Our union, in particular—well, I had breast cancer myself in 1987, so...you know, and here it is almost 30 years

later, and I'm doing just fine, thank heavens. But what was shocking, in the '80s, in the late '80s, the AFT—we had a staff person in Washington working on occupational health, and she found out that there had been a study showing that teachers were dying of breast cancer at a rate higher than almost women in every other occupation in the country, so that shocked us, and that got AFT to designate some money for a major project on breast cancer.

So we did a tremendous amount of awareness training all across the country. We had an all day program in Chicago. But we did have a major fight to get mammograms covered by our insurance. The Board of Education is self-insured, and even when a state law is passed requiring the coverage of certain things, like the screening mammogram, the Chicago Board of Ed did not have to abide by it because they were exempt as a self-insured employer. So that became a major contract issue.

They would cover what's called a diagnostic mammogram, which means that if you have a lump or something significant, then you could have a mammogram, but if you did not have some visible signs, you needed the screening, it was not covered. We wanted women to get it because it would help discover it early, in a significant percentage, but they would have to pay out of their pocket. So getting that covered by our agreement was a major project that took a couple years to accomplish, but we did it.

And the fight to get birth control covered was even harder. It was covered, but then when Paul Vallas came in—I believe it was when Vallas came in—they did not cover it. And Governor Blagojevich signed a law that if your medical insurance covered prescriptions in Illinois, it must also cover prescribed birth control medications and devices. But again, the Board of Education, being self-insured, was exempt. And this was in the years when we had the money for abstinence education, and we didn't have comprehensive sex education, which we also had to fight for.

So we finally—you know, little by little. First we got generic birth control covered, then we got birth control covered like any other medication. I think now it does cover it like it's supposed to, but this was just an ongoing battle for years, when we never should have had to fight, but did.

We also worked a lot on empowering our members. We would do workshops on assertiveness training, when that was popular. And part of assertiveness training is...we'd have to teach people how you have to be able to say what you want. It's quite one thing to say what's wrong and how bad things are, it's quite another for you to say what you want to fix it, so that was part of it. And just learning the difference between being aggressive, being passive.

Assertiveness training was welcomed by the women who went to our workshops. And we had stress management workshops for women. Yeah, we did a lot of different things, and had a good time doing it.

MAJ: Were you the head of the Women's Rights Committee during this entire time?

HRO: I was the chair of the committee for about 25 years. Yeah, uh-huh. And when you have a new union president elected, then the new union president puts in his or her own people, so when Debbie Walsh Lynch became president, she appointed someone else. [*Interruption.*] Where were we?

MAJ: You were saying when a new...why don't you start that part again?

HRO: Oh, all right. When a new union president is elected, then that new president appoints his or her chairs of the committee, so I was no longer the chair of the committee, although I did remain an active member on it. Three or four years later we had another election, and a new president, and then I was appointed chair again. [*Laughs.*]

But now I'm retired, so now Karen Lewis is our president. She's a wonderful union president. I'm active on the committee and it is time to turn chairing the committee over to younger people. But I am proud of the legacy that we have. One of the things we did on women's history was we did a booklet on women in labor history. And I remember you were involved in this, because I think you set up the conference. I think it was at University of Illinois. I can't remember just which year.

MAJ: Teaching women's history.

HRO: Yeah. Bobby Hall was there. We had a poster presentation with our work on women in labor history, and Yolanda Hall got a bunch of us together at lunchtime who were interested in labor history, and that very day we started the Women in Labor History Project, which I was active in for many years. And that became the Working Women's History Project, of which I am vice president. And our whole Women's Rights Committee really takes credit for the forming of this project and we support all of the work of Working Women's History Project, and some of our members are active on it.

MAJ: Who was president of the union during all of those years? Was it one person?

HRO: Well, it was Robert Healey, followed by Jacqueline Vaughn, and then it was Tom Reece, who was her vice president, and then... We have different political parties within the union, and so it was a different political party, I guess you would say, or a different caucus came in when Deborah Lynch was elected president. So she was president for, I think, just one term. And then Marilyn Stewart was elected, so that's when I was put back on as Women's Rights chair. She served two terms, and then Karen Lewis came.

And I had always begged Karen Lewis to join the committee. I wanted her so badly on the committee because she was a sharp woman, and so supportive of the things we did, but she always had too much on her plate, which I realized she did. So when she became [president], it was time for a younger person to

take over. So I'm on the committee and I'm hoping I'm nurturing the younger union people to carry the torch.

MAJ: I'm sure you are. Can you say something about Jackie Vaughn and her influence?

HRO: Well, Jackie Vaughn was a strong leader. I mean, she didn't shirk from anything. And I think many people know she fought her own battle and succumbed to breast cancer herself, which just made us work that much harder to make sure as few of our members as possible would get it, or if they did get it, that they could get it cured. So yeah, we had strikes.

She supported the work of the Women's Rights Committee. And I remember her coming to one of our committee meetings. This was after her trip to—I don't know if it was Nairobi or Kenya, but she had taken a trip to Africa. And this is when pantsuits were just coming in, and women at first were criticized for wearing pantsuits. Well, she wore the pantsuits in Africa and she told us that they took her as a prostitute in Africa because the women in Africa absolutely were not supposed to wear pants. I don't know why I remember that.

But we worked with Jackie Vaughn to promote the women's history, all of the things that we were about, we would count on Jackie Vaughn supporting us. So when she passed away, we became active in the Why Me race against breast cancer. Each year we would have a union team and we would raise a lot of money for them each year until they finally folded in 2012.

So now we want to do more to support Planned Parenthood. And one of our members who, she used to be the drama teacher at the Franklin School of Fine Arts, she is also a playwright, and she had written a play on—it was called "Shadow Town" about the sex trafficking, especially of children in Chicago. I didn't realize it was such a problem in Chicago. I knew it was in foreign lands. I didn't realize what a problem it was right back here.

But she put on that play in Bucktown, and she's going to have a sequel on the Johns in Skokie in the fall, so our union gave her a lot of support on that, and she's raising money, and we're helping to raise money for two organizations that help women who are victims of this sex trafficking, and also who are doing preventive work with some of our students in the Chicago Public Schools, some of them working in the schools in Englewood. A lot of girls are deceived into this and, you know, they're children. And it's right under our noses, and we don't know what's going on.

MAJ: Well, let's go back, and tell me a little bit about your involvement with NOW.

HRO: Well, the National Organization for Women, at first it was the only organization. It worked on everything that was important to us, and it's like we were all in agreement on everything. And then as the years went on, especially

after ERA went down the tubes in Illinois, we had many other organizations working on different aspects.

But for me that active involvement in NOW was nourishment, for me to do the work that I was doing through Chicago Teachers Union. CLUW, Coalition of Labor Union Women, same thing. We would work on issues nationally, and I would meet such wonderful and inspiring women—Addie Wyatt I got to know better through national CLUW than I did right here in Chicago, although she'd often come to the Chicago CLUW meetings, which was wonderful. Clara Day, some wonderful labor leaders I met through CLUW who inspired me to do the work that I did through Chicago Teachers Union.

Chicago Teachers Union you would view as a little part of the world. When you want to change the social scene, the organizations give you the vision and the goals, but to actually make those changes, you know, in your own little corner of the world, that's pretty labor intensive work, and I began to realize even though, you know, our members in CTU were mainly progressive, still we would have all kinds of views. I would have a lot of hostility on a lot of things, especially coverage of birth control, reproductive choice. Some of our members—and I'd hear mostly from male members who were against it—but for us to prevail and really...and remember, we are 75% female.

It takes a lot of work, a lot of educating, a lot of persuading, and sometimes you deal with...sometimes I'd get hate mail. [*Laughs.*] Not often, but...little by little, you know, you just keep plugging away. As Susan B. Anthony said, never another season of silence. So sometimes even when you think you're not getting anywhere, you at least keep talking about the issue, you don't let it disappear.

MAJ: Tell me about your experience with CLUW. When did you first learn about their work?

HRO: When I became chair of the Women's Rights Committee, one of the first things I did was join the Coalition of Labor Union Women, and I was quite active in the Chicago chapter for many years. I was on the board for a while. And then I guess it was in the '90s I was elected AFT representative to the national CLUW board.

And also they appointed me the chair of the Women's Health Committee, which took up a lot of time and energy, because we would plan, sometimes, health fairs or health conferences at CLUW. So I became more involved at the national level than at the local level, although I, you know, I didn't hold office anymore at the local level.

But CLUW has been absolutely phenomenal. Nationally we just had our 40th anniversary in Chicago at the Palmer House, had a wonderful conference there. And Katie Jordan heads the Chicago chapter of CLUW. She is on our board of

Working Women's History Project. We would not be able to accomplish what we do without Katie and the support of Chicago CLUW, who have been just phenomenal. We work with each other and support each other in those mutual goals.

And also through CLUW we get women in other unions involved. CLUW is women from all unions—Teamsters, SEIU. I don't know that we have many nurses' unions involved with CLUW, but AFSCME. You go to a Chicago CLUW meeting, there are people from a variety of unions, which is great, so we can all be on the same page in promoting the goals that we have for labor union women. And we have men there, too, some supportive men. And certainly my husband Paul is a member. Can't say I can get him to go to meetings, but he certainly supports us in what we do.

MAJ: CLUW was founded in Chicago.

HRO: It was, 40 years ago. And it was founded at the...it was called then—what was it called? The Congress... Well, it was the Congress Hotel. We have our plaque in there. And Addie Wyatt had a major part in getting that set up. And I remember getting a phone call from the chair of Women's Rights Committee at the time saying, Helen, you really need to come to this.

And I wanted to come to it, especially when I heard the excitement in her voice, but I was a single mother, and I was working five days a week in the schools, I'm taking classes at Northeastern in the evening so I can get the graduate hours and up my salary a little, and going to all of the union meetings, and I had to spend some time with my child. I mean, women would offer to babysit, but I was the mother. I had to spend some time with my child. And it was a day that we had planned these special things, and she came first that day. I wasn't going to disappoint her.

I felt very badly that I missed it because it was such a big, big movement, but I just was not able to be at that founding meeting. But very happy to be involved with it later, and to be a part of the 25th anniversary and the 40th anniversary. Of course we're so disappointed with the Congress Hotel now. As you know, they got some new owner that was terribly anti-union. The workers there went on strike for years. We would go and we would picket with them.

Our Working Women's History Project interviewed the women on the picket line. We did a dramatic presentation. We tried to raise a little money for them. But we were very disappointed in that hotel. Very happy, though, to have our 40th anniversary at the Palmer House, which is a union hotel.

MAJ: What did you hear about that initial meeting?

HRO: Just that there were at least three or four times as many women coming as they expected. And when there's coffee and rolls, the women were asked to cut their roll into four pieces and share with their sister so there would be enough food.

And everybody wanted the same things. They wanted decent pay, decent working conditions, more family-friendly working conditions. They wanted a voice in their union. They wanted to be able to reach leadership positions in their union.

Because remember, in those days, all of the labor union presidents were men, and they were usually white men. And it's taken decades to change that. In fact somewhere in those files you'll find a letter—it wasn't all that many years ago—written to...was it the head of the carpenters union who was hosting a meeting of the AFL-CIO, some group in Illinois, and I think he was having strippers there for the men's enjoyment. So we were furious about that. That was one of the things we wanted stopped. So through CLUW we sent a letter to him, and that did not happen again.

But those are the kinds of things we had to stop. I mean, patriarchy was very strong right within union leadership. But we still have a ways to go in so many areas in our unions, too. But now we have a lot of female leaders. Things have changed a great deal, and there's been some major change at national AFL-CIO in recent years, but it's been a very long time coming. It takes a long time to change a society.

MAJ: How did you first meet Addie Wyatt?

HRO: I believe I met her at a Chicago CLUW meeting, because she would come. And I don't know when she became a pastor, but she... I mean, she is just a wonderful speaker, and so inspiring, and I loved her stories. And when you hear from Addie and...well, especially Addie and some other women like her, they just give you the courage and the desire to accomplish things in the world that you deal with, in the organizations you deal with.

So that's what Addie did for me, as she did for so many women. I mean, she fought. She was what, in the Meat Packers Union, and she was just kind of thrust into a leadership position as a delegate, and I guess you just kind of learn as you go. And she did it. And so you figure, well, if she can do it, maybe I can do it, too, and I'm not asked to do as much as she was asked to do.

MAJ: She was amazing.

HRO: Yeah, yeah.

MAJ: Tell me a little bit about the ERA fight, what you remember about that.

HRO: Oh, the fight for the Equal Rights Amendment. We wanted to be recognized as being fully equal to men in our constitution, with all the rights that men have, we should have.

MAJ: And when did that issue first come up for you?

HRO: Well, that first came...I guess when I joined NOW it was starting. I guess it was happening decades and decades ago with Alice Paul, but it was a sleeper for many, many years. It wasn't until the rise of the second wave of feminism that it became an issue again. So that was a major thrust of the National Organization for Women. It was really through them that I learned about it, and that was my main organization working for it, although I did work somewhat with other organizations.

There were some focused solely on equal rights in Illinois, so I worked somewhat with them. League of Women Voters was involved. But we thought all of our problems would be solved if only we got the Equal Rights Amendment passed. I mean, that was simplistic. It didn't pass, and so we have been working piecemeal on things, one piece of legislation after the other.

We have made a lot of progress, and I'm just delighted that it has come up in the Illinois legislature again, because as you know, we are one of three states that failed to pass it. So we're hoping we can get it passed now. We had an arbitrary, capricious deadline placed on us for passing it nationally. But it would be, I hope, more than symbolic if Illinois passes it, and I think we'll be able to get that done now that we have legislators interested.

We've always had...there's always been... The first man in office, or the first political person I worked for was Alan Greiman, who was state...was he my state representative? He was before they redistricted. And he was the main supporter of the Equal Rights Amendment, so I volunteered a lot of time for him. And in fact when Paul and I got married, he's the one who married us—*[laughs]*—which was really nice. I forget where this is going now.

But anyhow, it still means a lot. I do not intend to go to my grave until the Equal Rights Amendment is a part of our constitution, so I will work for it until the day I die.

MAJ: Shall we talk about Cassandra? Tell me about Cassandra.

HRO: Oh, Cassandra. Cassandra is the Radical Feminist Nurses Network that I learned about, I guess it was, in the early '80s. I will say once I became a feminist, at least in those first few years, it seemed like nursing was left out of the feminist movement, that there were women working on making feminist values a part of our society, but I didn't think nurses were really a part of it, or really interested in it, and that was very frustrating to me.

So it was, I guess, 1980 I decided to write a book which I called *RN Revolution Needed*, and it was really about how feminism could help nurses. I talked about the doctor-nurse games, I talked about the Lemons case, which was a very interesting case. It was in Colorado, and it was nurses suing...was it the city of Denver? I'm not sure.

But they had done this study to show how the nurses who worked for the city there, their job required as much or more skill, knowledge, there were all kinds of issues—skill, knowledge, safety, a whole list of things. But it required more of them than it did for the sign painters, the tree cutters, a number of other city jobs, but yet it was mainly these male dominated jobs the workers got a lot more money.

So the nurses did get this to court, and I remember reading the legal proceedings, even the judge looking down at the nurses and reading from the Declaration of Independence. And he said, you see this? It said all men are created equal, it doesn't say anything about women. I guess he thought he was being funny.

But, I mean, I was just horrified. And what else did he say? He said he was so impressed with all the research that the nurses did, and he could not argue with it, but he was going to rule against them because to do otherwise would upset the entire economy of the United States, or something along those lines. Anyhow, there's a chapter in the book on it.

So I wrote about a lot of things. For a year I tried to get the book published, and I finally got an interested publisher. The publisher was in New York, and I did go out to New York to meet with them, and they wanted me to redo it as a textbook. Now this was before computers. I had typed this all on a manual typewriter, and there wasn't any way to scan it into a modern computer, which was pretty new to people. And at that time I had been appointed chair of Women's Rights, and I wanted to move on with my life, so the book never did get published.

But it did [make me want] to get nurses much more involved in feminism, and I was just thrilled to find out about Cassandra, which I read about. There was a small article in the *American Journal of Nurses*, which was published by the American Nurses Association. And so I wrote to the contact person there to try and find out what was happening in Chicago, and if I could get involved with a Cassandra group in Chicago.

And I finally heard back from, I think it was, a woman named Jean Wood, who taught at University of Illinois School of Nursing. And she had wanted to get something started, but just didn't have the time, so if I would go ahead and do it, that was fine with her. So I did find some nurses who were interested. And our first meeting, I don't know if it was at my house. One of our early meetings we had at Women and Children First Bookstore, which at that time was on Halsted. The owners were just wonderful in letting us do that. Alice Dan from University of Illinois was helping us do that.

But Cassandra, Radical Feminist Nurses Network, means different things to different people. To me, if you were simply a feminist, you were considered radical if you were a nurse. That was enough for me. But I know for other

women, especially Peggy Chinn and Charlene Wheeler, who started it, it was much more of a women centered network.

Actually, we were called webs. We were all spinning, and it was circular. And the logo for Cassandra had the moon, the women's labyrinth and the snakes, which were symbolic of healing, and everything was to be done by consensus, and it was very, very women centered. I think that what we did was a lot of consciousness raising among ourselves, as the early feminist groups did, but we did that as nurses.

And we did have a nurse midwife in our Cassandra group, and we had one of the first nurse practitioners. And they had to really fight to practice because the state of Illinois wasn't going to let them practice. They were not being controlled completely by doctors, and that was not to be allowed. Their office was ransacked, their things taken, and we did rally for them as best we could.

But we were always a small group, but we did nurture each other, tried to empower each other to write about, talk about, do the things we needed so nurses could achieve their goals and have a voice where they worked. For me joining a union was a big part of that, too, but I don't know that that was conceived as part of the overall Cassandra goals. But certainly being a union member gives you a voice and enables you to accomplish a lot of things you couldn't do on your own.

MAJ: How long were you involved with Cassandra?

HRO: Probably about ten years at most and then, yeah, we kind of fell apart. But we had exciting meetings, get-togethers, and talking about different things. One of the people who came, one of the nurses was one who got involved early on in domestic violence. We didn't realize what a problem it was. She had been a victim of it herself, and we began to find out how frequently this happened to women. And she, of course, wanted women screened in the emergency rooms, and she wanted medical personnel to be much more aware of it and be able to recognize it and deal with it because we weren't. So yeah, it just—

MAJ: What year would that have been?

HRO: This was early, mid '80s, so it was quite a while ago. Domestic violence is something we continue to fight against. I don't know how much progress we've made.

MAJ: So nurses weren't dealing with that, particularly, or aware of it until the '80s, you don't think?

HRO: Well, I wasn't. I mean, I was a nurse and I really wasn't aware of it. Just like the sexual trafficking and exploitation of our children in Chicago, I was not aware of what a problem it was until very recently, just in the last year. I mean, granted I worked at a magnet high school, where I had serious students. They

weren't dropping out with gang problems. But I was naïve myself on how serious a problem it is, so it took one of our retired teachers, who has formed her own theatre company called Her Story to raise awareness.

MAJ: Mary Bonnett?

HRO: Mary Bonnett did that. And when she did her play in Chicago, she had a different celebrity each night come, and one night she had Karen Lewis, our union president. Karen Lewis had a small part in the play and was so moved by it she encouraged our Women's Rights Committee to make a project on this, which we're doing.

MAJ: What else would you like to talk about?

HRO: Well, let's see. I've talked your head off. I did write one other book which did get published, thanks to Working Women's History Project, and that was called *Working Without Uniforms*, and it was the story of the school nurses in Chicago from 1951 to 2001. And that came about because when Paul Vallas came in as head of the schools, one of the first things he wanted to do to save money was to abolish our school health program and just use the city health department for whatever things had to be done, which we knew was totally naïve and wouldn't work.

But I guess what struck me, because he did have so much power, was if this program does go down the tubes, all these women that I have worked with so many years and have done so much to help the children of Chicago, it would be like they never existed, the work that they had done would never be known. It would all just be an invisible black hole.

So by then I had learned about—and you were certainly a part of this—about oral histories and their importance, and so I got a couple women to work with me, and we started getting some histories from the nurses. I mean, I was no expert at it, but I thought every nurse learns how to take a health history, learns how to interview people, certainly we can do this. So we started gathering stories, and those that didn't interview, some of them would help with typing it up.

And my friend at Loyola, Karen Egenes, who taught there, she knew a lot about publishing a book. She was a wonderful help, and she got some of the early history of school nursing. And we got the book together, and it was published by Working Women's History Project.

Funding for it came from Chicago Teachers Union, from a number of organizations. And of course I didn't make a penny on the book, and I didn't care about making any money. Actually, it's costly to make a book. But any money that came back in sales went to Working Women's History Project, which enabled us to carry out some of our programs.

But because that book was written, we had a dramatic presentation on school nursing done by students in the drama class at Jones Metropolitan High School—it used to be Jones Commercial. That was one of the schools I used to be the nurse at. And then Loyola University, where I had graduated, they wanted to do a program on school nursing because the following year was the hundredth anniversary of school nursing in Illinois.

And actually, school nursing got its start as a way of controlling communicable disease. Students weren't going to school, or disease would spread through a school because there was so much communicable disease. So the first nurses that worked in the schools, that's what they were all about, was just controlling the spread of communicable disease.

And then it grew into so much more—health promotion, health prevention, early identification of health problems, early remediation, making accommodations for learning needs. I have never been bored as a school nurse. And yes, I'm very happy we got that book published. And we have a copy in the Library of Congress, so their stories will live on.

MAJ: What happened to the interviews you did?

HRO: They're in a box somewhere in my basement, along with some of the taped interviews.

MAJ: And they were taped mostly?

HRO: Most of them were taped. A few of them were just taken on paper, but most were taped.

MAJ: Well, that's great.

HRO: And all of this, you know, it's all been a lot of work, but it's also been a lot of fun all these years.

MAJ: Do you want to talk about anything else that you can think of?

HRO: Well, I think I covered the main things pretty well.

MAJ: I'll just pause this for a second.

[Pause.]

MAJ: You can say whatever you want to about it.

HRO: I would like to go back and say a little bit more about our breast cancer project. As I mentioned, we had the study discovered by our American Federation of Teachers occupational health person showing that teachers were dying of breast cancer at a rate higher than women in most every other occupation. The only

other ones dying at such a high rate were either nuns or librarians. And this was totally unacceptable, so we were determined to change that.

And there were a number of things that had to be done. Mainly we had to start educating our members, who were mostly female, about the need for clinical breast exams, for self-breast exams on a regular basis, so that if they did notice any lump or anything unusual, they'd bring it to the attention of their doctor.

And also the screening mammograms were starting to be very helpful in revealing early breast cancer, and we knew that early detection was the key to survival. We didn't know how to prevent breast cancer, but we did want early detection so that our members would not die of it.

So that's why we started a major educational campaign through AFT locals throughout the country. We had a big program in Chicago on it. And I think I had mentioned how we had to get our contract changed so that screening mammograms would be covered because the cost could be quite high, and our members weren't getting those mammograms because it was too costly.

So we did, over the years things did change, and the last we asked our occupational health person, the current statistics show that teachers are not dying at a rate any—I mean, any death is too high, but our death as an occupational group is no higher than any other group, so we have made progress there.

MAJ: Good. That's great. Well, this has been wonderful, Helen. I really enjoyed talking to you. So let's bring this to a close, and then if you think of anything, we can get together again.

HRO: Okay, all right. Thank you for all your time, wow.

MAJ: Wonderful. That was great. You were really prepared.

[End of recording.]