



ILR ALUMNI NEWS

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Vicki Saporta Receives 1993 Judge William B. Groat Alumni Award



Vicki A. Saporta '74, recipient of the 1993 Judge William B. Groat Alumni Award

When Vicki A. Saporta walked into an organizing meeting for a manufacturing plant in a southern state, male workers looked at the young woman in disbelief and asked, "Are you going to be our organizer?"

But, Vicki recalls, "by the end of the meeting, they didn't care if I was a woman or a man, because they saw that I cared about their concerns and was ready to mobilize them to handle their problems in the workplace. Sometimes employers underestimate me, but not for long."

And for good reason. A month after she graduated from the School of Industrial and Labor Relations in 1974, Vicki started a career in union organizing that has led her to the top in the nation's largest private sector union.

In the International Brotherhood of Teamsters (AFL-CIO), once dominated by truck drivers and warehousemen, Vicki made her mark quickly. She became the first woman organizer for the Teamsters, and she was the first woman in the nation to become a union's national director of organizing.

In her spacious office in the Teamsters' modern white office building in Washington, DC, a couple of blocks from the Capitol Building, Vicki explained why she believes that a woman can succeed in organizing workers.

"Women listen," she said. "They pay attention to details, and they care. Also, if a woman goes into union work, she must have a commitment because of all the time it requires."

Vicki spent her first 10 years with the Teamsters traveling about 200 days a year. Now as director of organizing for the Inter-

national Brotherhood of Teamsters, she's on the road at least once a month. She described a union that has come a long way since it was founded to represent men who drove teams of wagon horses.

"Today 25 percent of our 1.6 million members are women, including nurses, airline cabin crews, public employees, and, yes, women truck drivers," she said. "We represent school principals, health care workers, assistant district attorneys, and the people who perform as characters in Disney World."

The Teamsters hired Vicki right out of Cornell in 1974 as an experiment to see what a woman could do in a union with a growing number of women members.

She became an organizer in the union's 13-state Western Conference based in Burlingame, CA, and a year later was promoted to international organizer, a post that kept her traveling the nation for nine years.

"Women have succeeded in the labor movement," she said. "The AFL-CIO conducted a study, and the results showed that women were 20 percent more successful than men in organizing workers."

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Campaign

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many aspects of labor-management relations could be handled best through joint union-management training sessions, utilizing reverse role-playing in small groups with equal numbers of management and union personnel in each.

Halan Establish Scholarship Fund

The John P. and Althea H. Halan Scholarship Fund was created by John P. Halan, MILR '57, and his wife Althea H. Halan to assist graduate students. Mr. Halan, who was himself a graduate student in the School of Industrial and Labor Relations, retired in 1991 as vice president for employee relations of Union Pacific Corporation.

Internship Fund Honors Professor Eleanor Emerson

Another fund for graduate student support, the Eleanor Emerson Internship Fund, has been handsomely enhanced through the wills of Eleanor Emerson and her sister Marjorie Emerson.

The fund honors a former ILR professor and statewide coordinator of labor education programs in New York State. It is designed to provide opportunities for training and field experience for ILR graduate students who are interested in preparing for a career in labor education. The fund was established in 1968 by family, friends, and labor education associates of Eleanor Emerson, and it continues to grow.

Program Support

In March 1993, with a gift of \$440,000, the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation funded an 18-month Central Europe Project at ILR to provide faculty development in the fields of human resource management and industrial relations in the Czech and Slovak Republic. Linda Gasser and John Boudreau are managing the project as Executive Director and Academic Director respectively. The project also has close ties to CAHRS and its International Programs Director, Vladimir Pucik.

The Cornell Work and Environment Initiative received a grant in the amount of \$50,000 from the John D. and Catherine T. MacArthur Foundation. The grant will enable WEI to sponsor international conferences and workshops, provide technical assistance, and study workplaces to recommend ecological changes.

Saporta

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Vicki, who grew up in Rochester, NY, where her father has just retired from his men's tailor shop, entered the ILR School with the intention of going on to law school.

In 1972, between her sophomore and junior years, Vicki was hired by the Teamsters for a summer job in which she accompanied students to England, Holland, Germany, and France to study labor relations in those nations. The following year, she spent one semester studying at the London School of Economics.

"By the time I graduated from ILR, I didn't want to go to law school," she said. "Organizing for a union appealed to my sense of social justice, and I love doing it."

Vicki described her view of the labor scene today: "We see a very hostile environment for unions, workers, and their rights to bargain collectively. But I think this is beginning to change after the greed of the 1980s.

"In the 1980s, a few people were making a lot of money at the expense of many others. It was the time of mergers and acquisitions. The talk of overseas competition was a smoke screen. Japan does not compete against us with lower labor costs. Japan trains its workers and provides job security for them."

"We need to create jobs in this country that pay living wages. It's strange. In other

countries—Poland is an example—we applaud unions as the leaders of democracy. But not here."

In ILR, Vicki said that Jean McKelvey was one of her role models. "She is the



ILR Advisory Council chair Saul Kramer '54 and ILR Alumni Association president Carolyn Jacobson '72 present the Judge William B. Groat Alumni Award to 1993 recipient Vicki Saporta '74.

professor who stands out in my mind, a woman who was a pioneer in arbitration. And to this day, I wish I had taken a course from the incredible Alice Cook."

Vicki sees a future for students interested in union work, and she notes that unions are recruiting on college campuses for staff openings. A poster mounted on the wall behind her desk proclaims: "Union Organizer: The Best Job in America. Become a Union Organizer. . . Make a Difference."

She explained that the poster announces a training program operated by the AFL-CIO Organizing Institute in Washington. Applicants who complete a three-day training course with distinction are offered internships followed by apprenticeships in union organizing. After completing the program, the AFL-CIO Organizing Institute helps place graduates as full-time organizers with participating unions.

"This is an excellent opportunity for young people who have a commitment that goes beyond just getting a job and who are turned on by this kind of work," Vicki said.

Vicki, who is a member of President Frank H. T. Rhodes's Council of Cornell Women, returns frequently to campus to talk with ILR students. She serves on the ILR Alumni Association Board of Directors, and she meets from time to time with the ILR extension staff in Ithaca and New York City.

Because of her outstanding achievement in union organizing and her energetic service to the School, Vicki was the recipient of the 1993 Judge William B. Groat Award. The Groat Award luncheon honoring her took place on April 15, 1993, at the Washington Court Hotel in Washington, DC.