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**U.16 Long Civil Rights Movement:
The Women's Movement in the South**

Interview U-0542
Katherine Mays
13 May 2011

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ABSTRACT – KATHERINE MAYS

Katherine Mays was born in Knoxville, Tenn. She has been a union organizer for over twenty years, and she has been a long time member of the local chapter of Democratic Women. Mays begins by describing her childhood in the Lonsdale area of Knoxville, Tenn. in the 1950s; her parents' careers; her education; the racial demographics of the Lonsdale neighborhood; and school integration. She then discusses how she knew her husband and her experience dating him when he was serving in the Vietnam War; marriage; moving to Texas, just outside of Fort Hood, in 1970; moving back to Knoxville, Tenn. and being a young mother. She describes the various jobs that she worked; working for the Tennessee Valley Authority in the 1970s; and working for the Office of Professional Employees International Union beginning in 1982. She talks about taking classes at the George Meany Center for Labor Studies and working for the Labor Council's Workers Reemployment Center in the late 1980s when factories began to relocate from the United States to Mexico. She discusses her support for union-made products in her own household. She describes how gender politics have changed in the labor movement; representing women as a union organizer; and barriers that women workers faced. She discusses her work with the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union; the factory workers she has represented over the years ; the changes she has seen in the United States economy, including plant shut-downs; her experiences as a union representative at factories including the Palm Beach factory; and how the labor movement has weakened over the years. She describes her participation in United Methodist Women; her understanding of the women's movement and its meaning in her life; and her involvement in the Knoxville Democratic Women's Club. This interview is part of the Southern Oral History Program's project to document the women's movement in the American South.

FIELD NOTES – KATHERINE MAYS
(compiled June 3, 2011)

Interviewee: Katherine Mays

Interviewer: Jessica Wilkerson

Interview Date: 13 May 2011

Location: UNITE HERE building, Knoxville, TN

THE INTERVIEWEE. Katherine Mays, who goes by Kathy, grew up in Knoxville and has lived there most of her life. She joined the Office of Professional Employees International Union representing the Tennessee Valley Authority employees in the 1970s, and she began working for the union in 1982. She graduated from the George Meany Center for Labor Studies in 1991. In 1991 she became an organizer for the Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union. She is currently an International Representative for the union, now known as Workers United.

THE INTERVIEWER. Jessica Wilkerson is a graduate student in the Department of History at UNC-Chapel Hill, currently conducting research for her dissertation which will explore social justice activism in southern Appalachia, with special attention to women's activism in the late 1960s and 1970s.

DESCRIPTION OF THE INTERVIEW. We sat in the conference room of the UNITE HERE building for the interview. I know Kathy from Jobs with Justice of East Tennessee, to which we both belonged. The interview was easy-going with no interruptions. Due to technical problems with the recorder, the interview pauses at hour one and hour two.

NOTE ON RECORDING. I used the SOHP's Zoom recorder.

TRANSCRIPT – KATHERINE MAYS

Interviewee: Katherine Mays

Interviewer: Jessica Wilkerson

Interview date: May 13, 2011

Location: Knoxville, Tennessee

Length: 1 disc, approximately 2 hours and 12 minutes

START OF DISC

JW: This is Jessie Wilkerson and I'm here with Kathy Mays in Knoxville, Tennessee.

And Kathy, can you first say when and where you were born?

KM: Yes. I was born August seventh, 1950, in Knoxville, Tennessee.

JW: Were you born in a hospital?

KM: Yes.

JW: Which one?

KM: Fort Sanders.

JW: Okay. And can you tell me a little bit about your childhood and what part of Knoxville you grew up in?

KM: I was born in Knoxville and grew up in the Lonsdale area and I lived there until I was married, and went to school across the street from my house, Lonsdale Elementary School. [I] went through the sixth grade there and then went to Rule High School, which was grades seven through twelve, which was about a mile away and walked to school. I have two sisters and a brother. My brother was ten years older than me and then I was born. Then my two sisters, the three of us were born within five years.

JW: And what did your parents do?

KM: My father was self-employed. He was a wholesale produce dealer, dealing mainly in eggs. And my mother had multiple jobs during my lifetime. During World War II they moved to Detroit. The rest of her family had already moved there and they moved there with my brother, who was just very small. And she worked in the Dodge factory where they made ambulances for World War II. Her job was to wire all the wires that went in the dashboard of the ambulance. My father was a security guard at the plant. But then when they came back here, Dad went into the family business and my mother then, I guess when we were in elementary school, my sisters and I, she started working. Most of the jobs that she had were secretarial-type jobs, but then she went through a period of time in the late 1960s where she was, at that time they called it the chief clerk of the election commission. Now they call it, it was Greg McKay's old job here, and he just recently was booted out. (laughs) But that was the job that she did, but it has a different title now. She worked for KCDC. She worked at the Heska Amuna Synagogue. She was the secretary for the rabbi. She just did those kind of jobs. She had a pretty good resume on her own.

JW: Can you describe the community that you grew up in?

KM: Lonsdale, at that time, everybody knew everybody else. We lived one block from the fire station. Next door to the fire station was a library. We grew up going to the library. If we were not in school, I can't remember a time that we weren't at the library some time during the day. I grew up next door to my husband's grandmother and his other grandmother lived next door to that. So we knew each other. We knew all of our neighbors. We walked to church. The next block over was the church we went to. It was just a very close community, unlike a lot of communities now. Where we live now, my husband is the one who gets out and meets the neighbors. I know a few of the neighbors, but not like we did when we grew up where we knew

everybody and they knew us and knew if we were supposed to be somewhere or we weren't supposed to be there. (laughs)

JW: What were the demographics of that neighborhood?

KM: I would say very few families were single parent families or households. So most of them had the mother and the father and the children. Well, they were all working families. In the neighborhood, there was the paper mill. So a lot of them worked there. There was also the iron company. A lot of them worked there. There was a furniture, a veneer company that made wood veneer. A lot of people worked there. And the railroad was close. So those were the kinds of jobs that people had in the neighborhood. Most of the mothers, I think, the majority of them probably stayed home with the children, very active in the school PTA and activities, church activities. It was mostly a white neighborhood. There were very, at that time, very strict boundaries where the African American people lived in the same Lonsdale area, but there was a certain place where their homes started and then the white people, the Caucasian people had theirs on the other end. Most people owned their home. I'd say not everybody, but most people did.

JW: Was there ever any boundary crossing?

KM: Oh yes, yes.

JW: In what ways?

KM: Where my husband lived, he lived up on the edge of the boundary and Sharps Ridge was on one end of his street. The back side of his street was where the African American, the neighborhood started. So they really had more interaction with and they played ball and rode bicycles and whatever with the kids, where we were more in the center of the neighborhood and the schools were not yet integrated. So we didn't, other than ride through their neighborhood to

get from one part of town to another, that was about all I did. But now Allen, he was right there and had friends who were African American.

JW: In those factories that were there, were those factories hiring white and black workers?

KM: Yes, some of them did. I'm not sure about the veneer company, but the iron company did and the paper mill did, too.

JW: And what year did you graduate high school?

KM: 1968.

JW: And the schools never integrated?

KM: Oh yes. When I was in the eighth grade, the schools were integrated.

JW: Okay. Do you recall that process?

KM: Yes, yes, because we had two elementary schools in the Lonsdale area. We had the Lonsdale Elementary and then there was Sam E. Hill Elementary School, and one was white and one was for African Americans. There was no middle school at that time. It was either elementary school and then the high school. So the kids from Sam Hill came to Rule High School. I don't remember too many problems with the integration, but I had a friend who, any time one of the African American kids would even brush up against her in the hall, she would run to the bathroom and wash her arm. And she had a hard time as long as we were in school, she still had a hard time with the integration, with the other kids. I made a lot of good friends in high school. It was really a good thing.

JW: And do you ever remember adults talking about integration?

KM: No, I don't remember the adults.

JW: So in that community, there wasn't a big backlash against it?

KM: No, no, probably because we had lived so close all along.

JW: You basically were in the same community anyway. So when you were young, what did you think you wanted to be when you were an adult?

KM: Oh I think like most kids, I thought, well, I would be a teacher or that maybe I would be a secretary like my mother. I tried substitute teaching and I said, "I need to stop this because it will make you hate children." (laughs) Because you know how they treat substitute teachers.

JW: So how would you describe your years, your education and your high school experience?

KM: It was fun. I can't say that there was any downside to high school. I was in the marching band. In fact, when I went to high school, seventh grade, I wanted to be in the band, but we didn't have band offered in the elementary school. I mean, I had taken piano lessons for a lot of years, but couldn't play anything in the band. And I had a friend who wanted to be in the band too. So the band director gave us a clarinet and put us in the uniform and said, "Here, learn to play." And we did. (laughs) And got into the band. Of course, I had some musical, I was able to read music before that. So that helped a lot. So that was a big part of my high school career and learned to play some different instruments all in the reed family, but not just clarinet: bass clarinet, alto clarinet, alto and tenor saxophone.

JW: And it all started with you just teaching yourself?

KM: Just teaching, yes. My friend Charlotte and I just taught ourselves. That, and then the last two years, when I was a junior and senior, don't know why, I got involved in the drama club and was in a couple of plays. That was fun, too.

JW: Did you meet your husband in high school?

KM: I knew him. We have pictures of us because the house that my parents lived in when I was born was next to his maternal grandmother. And so we lived there until I was in the second grade and then the house, there was just a vacant lot on the corner, and then our house was next and then his grandparents were the next house. So my dad moved a house from the next street over and that was a big, exciting thing happened because here comes, they're having to raise up the power lines and everything to move this house. They had to go down the block and come all the way up our street and then it pulled on a wagon by mule teams. Anyway, so we moved then onto the corner house and then my husband's grandparents, his maternal grandmother moved in that house and then his paternal grandmother still lived in the other house.

So we have pictures of us when I was like three or four years old and he's five or six years old playing in the yard together. We have multiple pictures. So we've just always known each other, but we never dated. We were in the band together, but he was two years ahead of me, you know, one of those old people. (laughs) He actually brought me home a couple of times from band practice, but we didn't date or anything in high school.

JW: So when did you start dating him?

KM: After he was already out of high school and I was going to the East Tennessee Band and Orchestra Festival. And that was one thing that once you were in the band, it was just like a group and anytime any of the group did anything, people came to listen to the concerts or whatever. And we were in Athens, Tennessee. We had been accepted into the band festival there, a few of us from the band, and he came down there with some of his friends. They had already graduated and he was at East Tennessee State University. So that's the first time there was a connection and then the next thing--. I wasn't attracted to him, but that's when the light went off for him.

Anyway, then he was drafted to go to Vietnam. Anyway, when he went into his basic training, his aunt, who lived next door to me with his grandmother, asked me if I would write to him because she said he probably would like to hear from somebody more his own age other than his mother. So I started writing him and so then when he came home on his leave, then he came and asked my dad if he could take me out. So that's how all that started.

JW: That's a great story.

KM: (laughs)

JW: How often did you write him?

KM: I don't know, probably every week or two in the beginning, but then when he went to Vietnam, I wrote him every day.

JW: And did he write you?

KM: Yes, and I still have all the letters.

JW: I was going to say did you keep those?

KM: I did.

JW: I hope you think about archiving them someday.

KM: Yes.

JW: Because that's history. So your relationship, did it develop through this letter writing?

KM: Mmm hmm.

JW: And so then when did you decide to get married?

KM: Well, he came home. He came home between his basic training and the advance training and we went out a couple of times. He had just been at Fort Campbell during that time. Then he went to, I can't remember the name of the army base, but it was in Washington state for

his advanced training. And then before he went to Vietnam, he came home and he was home, I don't know, maybe two, maybe three weeks and we went out several times during that time. And it was over Thanksgiving time. Then he left and then he had the chance to go for an R&R and he decided to go. He could either have gone to Australia or Hawaii. So he decided to go to Hawaii, and he wrote my mother a letter and asked her if she would come with me so that I could meet him in Hawaii, and she said yes. And he sent the money for me to travel. She paid her way, but he sent the money for me and that's when he asked me if I would marry him.

JW: That's so romantic.

KM: (laughs)

JW: That's an incredible story. It's making me tear up.

KM: So when he came back, he came back in December of 1969 and we got married about three weeks after he came back home.

JW: Had you thought much about the war before that or did him getting involved make you think differently about the war? I'm just wondering what your thoughts were about that.

KM: I thought about it a lot because we had already had a couple of friends to be killed in Vietnam. And a lot of people that I knew and had graduated from high school with, and that he had graduated from high school with had already, had either gone and come back or were over there during that time. It made me more, I guess, I didn't pay much attention to the news about the war until he went and then I got to where I would watch it at like the six o'clock news every night. We sent packages with things from here. We would make tape recordings of people, his family and then my brother and sisters, and send him that so he could hear everybody, hear everybody's voice. We sent cookies and things like that, but I guess I didn't really take an issue with the war until there was all the—how the soldiers were treated when they came, where

people would spit on them and call them baby killers. And that may have been true for some, but it wasn't true for all, and that was kind of hurtful. And then when he came home, he still had six months left to do. So after we got married, we moved to Texas where it was all military people, and I didn't like all military people. And a lot of them that we lived around were just newly married people like we were, away from home and think you know how to do something and you don't really know to do it. (laughs)

JW: So did you or your husband personally experience some of the prejudices against the soldiers who were coming back? Do you recall any moments where you experienced that?

KM: I didn't and I don't know--. He talks very little about it. Unless you ask him a specific question, he doesn't just volunteer.

JW: So you moved to Texas and you were there for--?

KM: About six or seven months, a little over. We moved in early January of 1970 and he had to stay until like the second week of July. So we were there that long, which was long enough. I did not like Texas, but I'd never been away from home and it was 1013 miles one way from our house, from here down there. There was another couple who lived in the area. They didn't live too close to us, but we knew them from here. So that was good. That was the first time I'd ever been camping, which was interesting because we didn't have anything and all we had was the military issued them a half of a tent, right. So if you have two people in the tent, each one of you has got a half. So it makes a whole tent. I don't know. But anyway, so we each had, we had that, which was then not quite enough for four people. That was interesting and we saw parts of Texas and ended up going back after our children were born so that they could see those parts of Texas, too.

It was interesting. We didn't know how to cook. We lived in a furnished apartment. All we had was dishes and clothes and towels and that kind of stuff. We didn't even have a phone. We'd go one time a week and we'd save up all of our change and go to a pay phone and call both sets of parents once a week. I did all of the laundry for him, except we sent one of his, well, he had a dress uniform and then he had just regular uniforms that he wore every day. So I would do those and starch them except for one that--. Well, we sent it to the laundry and had it really stiff starched for when they knew they were having an inspection. We got, I don't know, I think he got more money because we lived off base. Because we were married, he got more money and got paid once a month. So you had to make it really stretch out. I know one time, payday was like the next day and we were cleaning out, getting his uniform ready to go to the laundry the next day, and we found three dollars. Oh you would have thought we had found hundreds of dollars. (laughs) So we went and with three dollars, we went to the Dairy Queen and we got us a hamburger and fries. So that was like a really big treat.

JW: So what was it like to be on a military base for those months as the antiwar protests are--?

KM: Well, we didn't live on the base.

JW: Oh right, right.

KM: We lived off base. We lived in Temple, Texas, which was outside of Fort Hood.

JW: Was it still a lot of military families?

KM: Oh it was all, except—we lived in a big two-story house that had been turned into four apartments and we lived in one of the upstairs apartments and there was a garage apartment separate from the house. The landlord and his wife lived downstairs right directly under us, but

then the other three families in the main house were all military families and then the one in the garage.

JW: So being in a community where it's mostly military folks, I wonder what that was like. I mean, the country was pretty divided, becoming pretty divided in those months during the time you were there about the war. I wonder if people talked about that or if that was ever coming up with the families or if people tried to block it out.

KM: I don't remember it ever even being discussed, especially among the women because most of the guys were at the base all day and we were the ones who were around. I don't remember us even talking about it, but it would have been, if there was any antiwar stuff, it probably would have been further away than we were from the base because just about everybody around there were either military families or they were renting to military families. It was just a pro-military.

JW: And there wasn't a GI movement? Like the people who started Vietnam Veterans Against the War, there wasn't any of that?

KM: I didn't see anything like that or hear of it. That doesn't mean there wasn't, but I just didn't.

JW: So when did you get to move back to Tennessee? Did you come back after Texas?

KM: Yes, yes.

JW: And did you move back to Lonsdale?

KM: No, we actually moved, for about a month, we stayed in a trailer out off Clinton Highway and then I had a great aunt who had an apartment above in the upstairs part of her house, and it was over in the Norwood-Inskip Area. And so we lived there for about a year and then we found a duplex and moved to that, and then we lived there when our son was born.

JW: And is your son your first child?

KM: Yes.

JW: And what year was he born?

KM: 1972.

JW: Had you started working at all during those years?

KM: When we got married, I worked for the Knoxville city school system. I was, I guess, a teacher's aide at that time. And then when I left, I did work in Texas and when we came back, I worked at the Knox County Health Department. I was the clerical person for working with the kindergarten, the nurse that worked with the kindergarten children, giving them their physicals and those kind of things. When I didn't have that to do, because it wasn't an everyday thing, then I helped out in the immunization department registering people and children for their shots.

JW: So how long did you stay, so I guess, you were the substitute teacher or no, the teacher's aide—

KM: The teacher's aide.

JW: Did you go back to school—

KM: No.

JW: At some point in those years?

KM: No.

JW: Or that happened later?

KM: Later.

JW: Okay, okay.

KM: Yes.

JW: So what were you doing in those years? You were becoming a mother for the first time.

KM: Yes.

JW: And you were working some.

KM: Yes, yes.

JW: And so '72, it's also when the women's movement is beginning to percolate. Were you becoming aware of women's issues and gender stuff at that point?

KM: Not at that point yet. I started with TVA in 1974 and I worked there for two years and then when Allen came back, when we moved back here, he, for about three months, when he first came back here, he got a job with the library, taking books from the main branch to the outlying branches. And then in September of that year, he got a job at TVA. Once he had started at TVA, then he started at UT on the GI bill. He graduated in 1975 and he has a bachelor's degree in agriculture. He's a soil scientist now with TVA, and so in 1976 he got a job to be able to move into that field. We had to [move to] Muscle Shoals, Alabama.

So we moved down there. I was seven months pregnant when we moved down there with our daughter and she was born while we lived down there. We were down there about a year. He was there actually longer, but at the end of that year, he knew they were moving, they were going to move back here, and they were going to move a TVA office onto the Oak Ridge National Laboratory site and they were going to be doing some joint studies with the national laboratory. But they weren't sure when that move was going to be made. So I had the opportunity to come back to TVA to work in Knoxville. Allen's grandmother said she would keep the children. We found an apartment that was close to my mother and dad. So we moved

ourselves back up here and then Allen went back and forth on the weekends. He would come on Friday night and go back on Sunday night, and he did that for almost two years.

JW: I bet that was tough.

KM: It was tough. It was tough, especially the one time that we were outside at the apartment, going out the door, locked ourselves out, did not have a key. The people in the office at the apartments, nobody was there. I had to carry Amy most of the way. Michael could walk. We had to walk from Pleasant Ridge Road all the way up into the middle part of West Haven to my parents' house, and I just hoped they were there. No cell phones at that time, so I just was hoping that somebody would be home because they had a key to our house and so they could then bring us back home. (laughs)

But it was kind of hard. But Allen wouldn't have had the opportunities that he's ended up having if we hadn't done that and if he hadn't felt that he could do that, that I could take care of the children. His grandmother was keeping them. His grandfather had passed away and that gave her something to do. And then he came home every weekend. It was hard, but it worked. It worked.

JW: And what was your job at TVA?

KM: I was a secretary and then I went to UT and took shorthand classes. And I took three semesters, or three quarters, of shorthand, passed the shorthand test at TVA, which then gave me a promotion. So then I was a stenographer and so I was that. And I left there in 1972, came back in 1977 and then stayed until 1982, and that's when I went to work for the union, not this union—

JW: Okay.

KM: But the Office of Professional Employees International Union.

JW: Okay. So at what point had you gotten involved with that union?

KM: When I came back, well, I was a member of the union when I worked at TVA before, but I didn't really get involved until I came back after Amy was born, and started out as a shop steward and then moved up to the secretary of the local and then moved up as vice president of the local. And then our local there, each main location of TVA, Knoxville, Chattanooga, Muscle Shoals, they each had their own OPEIU local. All the locals belonged to a council and the council employed the staff. Well, there was some, I guess, some bickering going on between the locals. So they decided everybody should just go and hire their own staff and have their own office and disband the council, and then we would still work together for negotiations, contract negotiations, but for everybody's grievances and their own problems that were in their own area, then they could handle them and not have to wait on somebody to come from a council office who may or may not know about their particular area.

So I started out as the secretary. I took a leave of absence from TVA and went to set up the office and did that. And then after about a year, a position came open for a business agent and so they asked me. I didn't apply for the job. I didn't even say anything. They asked me if I would do it, and I was hesitant because I didn't know. They said, "Whatever training you think you need, we will see that you get it." And so that's when I started in taking classes at the George Meany Center for Labor Studies. I took all the grievance and arbitration classes that they offered. Anyway, so then that's what got me involved, interested in the college degree program through them. So in 1991, I graduated. That's when I got my bachelor's degree.

See, I was already forty years old. That's why even now, my son-in-law just graduated and he says, "I'm going to graduate," I said, "Yes, you are." I said, "You should." I said, "Because it's not just you." I said, "It's your wife and your children, too. They've been to school

just as much as you have. It's important to them too." So anyway, and I said, "Plus," I said, "You did this having your own job, full-time job, being a full-time parent and a full-time spouse, and going to school full-time." I said, "That needs to be honored."

JW: Yes, it does. It's a feat.

KM: Yes. So anyway, that's what I did and then in the meantime, in 1988, yeah, I left the OPEIU. I was offered a job by the Labor Council. That's when jobs were starting to leave here, leave the United States and go to Mexico or other countries. So we started having plant closings. The Labor Council had gotten a grant through the Department of Labor. They called it the Workers Reemployment Center and it was a place where dislocated workers could come. We could help them prepare a resume. We had classes on how to conduct yourself in an interview because most of them had been employed wherever for a long time. They hadn't had to look for a job. Some of them didn't even have a high school diploma. So we offered them the opportunity to go to GED classes and things like that, made those arrangements. So I went and worked there for almost two years. Then I had a little break because the grant wasn't renewed. So then that just kind of left me in between, but in between then is when I finished the bachelor's degree.

So then, let's see what happened. And I'm just doing this. If you need to know something else—

JW: No, I will.

KM: Okay.

JW: It's good to hear the timeline.

KM: Okay. But anyway, when I was at the TVA before I got the job with the union is when I got really involved in the union. We became members of the Labor Council and the first job I had at the Labor Council was not an elected job, but it was head of the union label

committee to promote union-made goods and union services. That was a big thing. That's when White Lily was still here and Merita was still here and we had a lot of places around that made, actually made--. Palm Beach was still here and Bike Athletic was still here. So we had actually a lot of union-made products in this area. The one thing that I stressed so much at home even: "We need to buy Merita bread and we need to buy White Lily. We need to buy Three Rivers cornmeal and we need to buy White Lily flour and White Lily muffin mixes," and whatever. We did that so much until--. And the kids caught onto that, too. I know one time Allen had been to the store and he came back with some other kind of bread and Amy just cried. She said, "Mom, if we eat that, will our teeth fall out?" (laughs) Because I said, "We can't eat that bread. We can't eat that. That's not union-made bread." "If we eat it, will our teeth fall out?"

That made me feel good that even though they were listening, they really were paying attention to what was going on. So that [was] good and then I guess that was the first time that I ever, well, the labor movement still has a long way to go, I think, as far as involving women as much as they should have. But I mean, that was the good old boys' club.

JW: The Labor Council was?

KM: Yes, yes. But I think over the years, there have been, I will have to say that Harold Woods did a lot to include women and to put women in positions in the Labor Council where they were either, sometimes they were a vice president, sometimes it was the recording secretary. I was the recording secretary for a long time, sat right up front with him every meeting, and I think that he did a lot for that to move women up.

But there's still a lot of unions. I remember going to one meeting over there. It was election time and I believe it was national elections. The Teamster guys came in and there were two women. There was me and one other woman sitting in the room, already there. They were

the last ones there and they came in. We were sitting at a table longer than this, and they came in the door and they went around and they shook hands with everybody until they got to me and her. They just went around us and then shook hands with everybody else. And I thought, "Well, that's okay. What goes around comes around." (laughs) Even when we used to have the Labor Day activities over here, we would call them because it was three of us, three women here planned the whole thing, they would never call us back. We had to get Brad [of UNITE] to call. Now they would talk to him because he has a Teamster connection. I don't know that they would have talked to him if he hadn't had the Teamster connection. They might have just because he was a man.

JW: So were women, the women you knew who were getting involved in the Labor Council or who were union women talking about this amongst themselves? Was this coming up?

KM: Yeah, yeah. It was coming up then.

JW: What were women's experiences? What were they noticing were the problems?

KM: Well, I know one was Suzanne Coile, who is now the president of the Labor Council, the first.

JW: I didn't know that.

KM: Oh yeah. She just was elected in November or December. She took office in January, the first elected woman president of the Labor Council. I guess where I [met her] first, she had a job working with dislocated workers. When I went to work for the Labor Council and to work for the Workers Reemployment Center and that was her job. She was to go around to the plants that were closing, that were union, and she would tell them what benefits they had to come as far as: you can go to school; here are the kind of schools you can go to; here are the kind of jobs that they want people to focus on because those are the jobs that they see in the future as

needing people. So she would go and explain all their rights. She would have somebody from Social Security come and somebody from the unemployment office.

And so anyway, she was in charge of all of the east Tennessee area. The other people that she worked with, they had, and still do, a grant with, I guess, the state Department of Labor. But anyway, there is one, a person in middle Tennessee, one in west Tennessee, and then there was the director of the program, all men. So when the director of the program at that time, I don't remember who it was, he moved up into the labor movement, and Suzanne had been there longer than anybody. A couple of times, that position became vacant. She wasn't even considered for it. And so we talked about those kind of things. Plus, we talked about it a lot.

She was going to the Meany Center for the college degree program part of the time I was. I started before she did. So we rode a lot together. So we had a lot of talking time, and so we would talk as we traveled back and forth from school. And then it would be the same thing. There would be very few women in the college degree program. It was kind of the same thing. The guys always had some kind of experience and they could always relate their experience. You might have had just a good of an experience and wanted to tell about or whatever, but they would sometimes cut you off or try to one-up you: "Well, that, but I've done this" or "I've done that," or whatever.

JW: And in those classes, were there ever women's issues raised or were they part of the curriculum in any way that you can recall? Or things like sexual harassment or sex discrimination?

KM: Some of that in the labor law classes, but other than that, it was not. It was not brought up because I will have to say that most of the instructors, if not all, made a good attempt at keeping that kind of stuff, keeping it down, making it not be an issue in their class, the

difference between men and women in the labor movement or anywhere. I think they did a good job. There were, of course, more men instructors than women.

JW: So when you were getting more involved in your union, the Office and Professional—

KM: Employees.

JW: Employees. It's such a long, unwieldy name. What were some of the issues that were coming in your local and was it mostly women that you were working with?

KM: I would say it was mostly women because we represented, well, at that time, it was called the SA and the SB classifications. The A were the administrative people. Some of them worked in the payroll department, either payroll or accounts payroll. Those were the A positions. The B positions were the clerical people, and there were men who were clerks, but by far, it was more of a female, more members were female than male.

JW: And do you think that impacted the sorts of issues or the things that people were concerned about in the union?

KM: Some of the ones, I think. While I was there, the contract was changed in negotiations to say that if you applied for a job and you didn't get it, that it was up to you, the employee, to be able to prove that TVA was arbitrary or capricious in not awarding you the job. You had to prove that. They didn't have to prove they weren't. You had to prove that they were. It seems like the ones that we had the most grievances about were women who felt like they had been the most qualified, the most senior person. They took away the seniority total, seniority. If all things were equal, then you could list this senior person and then TVA could not be arbitrary or capricious. But if they were, you had to prove that it was them if you felt like it was. I don't remember having any where a male claimed that he didn't a job because he was a man. It was the

women who, and most of them were promotions, not necessarily just a lateral job, but promotions.

JW: But in the contract, they weren't really being backed up by the union.

KM: Right. And I don't recall that we won any of those. It's almost impossible to do.

JW: So how did people react to that? What was the response?

KM: Most of them just said, "Well, there's no need." Somebody would say, "Well, I think I should have got the job because I've been here longer. I've been secretary in other places. I have done some higher level, I've had higher level responsibilities." But they felt like it was impossible to prove that the company was arbitrary and capricious. So they just said, "Well, you know, there's nothing we can do about it." So they just kind of let it go and felt that it was something that could never be achieved, and I guess they felt that they had a pretty good job and don't rock the boat.

JW: So when did you get your job with UNITE?

KM: Here?

JW: Yeah.

KM: April the twenty-ninth, 1991, and it was Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union then. I am the only one that they have ever hired through an ad in the newspaper. I don't know how they got Doug [Gamble], but most people who the union hires come out of their ranks, come out of a shop. Doug didn't and I don't know how he got here, but I know it wasn't through an ad in the newspaper. Mine was through an ad in the newspaper. And I had just gotten my degree from the Meany Center in January of '91, and I came three months later; I had this job.

JW: So can you describe what was going on in those early months and the first couple of years?

KM: Well, of course, I was used to TVA. I was used to that kind of work. So when I came here, the first plants that I got were Palm Beach plants where they were actually making men's suit coats. There was one here on Baxter Avenue and then there was one, the cutting room had just moved from there out to behind the Wal-Mart on Clinton Highway. And so I had those two to start, and then I had the Knoxville Glove Company, which was another sewing company. It was just a whole different ballgame. I don't know.

I guess this was bad of me, but I knew, some of my friends from high school's mother had worked at Palm Beach and they lived in the same kind of house that we lived in. We didn't have a lot and I thought, "Well, you know, they just don't make anything there." So I thought, "Well, I don't want to look--." I was trying to be conscious of what kind of clothes I wore the first time I went over there because that was back when very few people wore slacks. Everybody was a dress or a skirt or whatever. So I thought, "I don't want to look like I'm uppity or anything when I go over there because these are hard-working people and I don't want to be out of place with them. I don't want them to think I'm something I'm not." So I thought, "Well, shoot, I'm not going to wear a necklace. I'll just wear the plainest earrings I have," not that I've got anything fancy, but--. Anyway, so I get over there and I mean, the first thing I'm drawn to is all the women, they've got rings stacked up on top. (laughs) I don't even know how they can bend their fingers to run things through the sewing machine. I thought, "Kathy Mays, you have just missed the boat here."

But it was something totally different. I'm used to people who make a salary, not even people who are paid hourly, and then I get there and people are paid piece-rate. So I had to learn

the lingo. I had to learn, Mark Pitt was our director then and he sent me that fall. I went to the University of Wisconsin at Madison and took a time study class so that I would know how rates are set and all that, so that I would be able to help with those kind of problems because those were big issues in the plant is, first, whether or not you can make the rate, is the rate set right, that kind of stuff. So I had the first, well, more than months, it was years, but to get comfortable enough with that. But that and then just learning the different--.

Then, as they added more to my workload, then I had to learn and it's the same now. I just picked up two new places. One in a sewing plant, but they do embroidery and they work in sales and one person might have ten or twelve machines that's going simultaneously or things going at one time. The other new plant I've got makes bowling balls. I guess it was the first time I went in the Palm Beach plant, I just couldn't believe how many people it took to make a coat and how many different parts there are to that coat. And everybody is doing their own little thing and then when you get to the cutting room and there's cutters and there's spreaders and the people who make the patterns.

It was just something new all the time. And that's what I'll have to say about this job. You don't get bored because there's something new. Something's closing and when something closes, hopefully you get something new to take its place. This time, it was because we had to lose a staff person. So we had to divide up her responsibilities. So I picked up the bowling ball factory in Hopkinsville, Kentucky. And it's called Rivers End Trading Company in Clarksville, Tennessee.

That was the first months was just trying to remember and get acclimated to the kind of work that I'll now see and have to learn about and deal with.

JW: So what has it been like in the twenty years you've been working here to see all of these places close and leave? Like most of those places you named, like the Knoxville Glove Company, well, the Knoxville Glove Company is still here, but it changed a lot.

KM: Yeah, but there's just about like six people left. But all the Palm Beaches are closed. It's time to negotiate the contract and everybody, we get prepared; the company gets prepared. We show up for the first meeting and, bam, they tell you the plant's going to close. You don't see it coming and nobody has a clue that it's fixing to happen. The Palm Beach places were here and it wasn't as hard for people to find another job. But when you get in places like Campbell County where there are very few other jobs and you're just hit with it and then there's no place to go. We have relationships with these people now and it's just hard. It's like one of your family, a member of your family losing their job. And you wonder what's going to happen to them. Even when I go back to Campbell County when I had a place up there close, you'd think as much as I come up here, I would see somebody from that other plant. If nothing else but driving down the road, I might pass them on the road. I never see them, never. So you know, you just wonder.

JW: Is that because they've moved on to other places?

KM: Either that or they didn't live, they might have lived in Scott County or they might have lived in Claiborne County. They could have lived ten miles away or whatever and they just weren't in town, just didn't come into town. It's hard. It's very hard when that happens. But then I've been fortunate enough to have other things to take their place. So you move on and you build relationships with other people and hope you don't have to see their plant close too.

JW: Were you ever involved in or was there ever a presence of the Coalition of Labor Union Women in this area?

KM: There has never been a big presence [here] and I really didn't know about them much until I came to work for (64:39) and one of the vice presidents of (64:44) was one of the leaders of the coalition of CLUW.

JW: Who was that? Was it Connie Kopelov?

KM: No, no. I can't remember the first one and then Jean Hervey was after her, but I can't remember the first lady, the first one's name. But we basically heard about it at conventions and things like that where the bigger union was there. It wasn't just our district or our region. It would have been something bigger than that.

JW: So were you working a lot with locals that were mostly women? Did you see that in these factories there was a large population of women?

KM: The Palm Beach, except for the cutting room, the Palm Beach plants were ninety-five to ninety-nine percent women. The cutting room was more men because that was, of course, the higher-paid jobs. The cutters were all men. The spreaders just about were all men. The pinners were just about all men. And then the women had less important jobs.

JW: And that never changed?

KM: Well, see, it closed in, what, 1999? I think it closed then. Occasionally, somebody, a woman would bid on a spreader job and they'd always find some reason she couldn't do it: "She's not tall enough. She's not going to be able to reach and get the spreading machine and drag it all the way down." And that's true because that was really before there was a big push for ergonomics to make the job fit the person, instead of the person fit the job. There was something about that, but they never even, sometimes would never even give the person a chance. They wouldn't say, "You can't have the job," but there would be enough talking before a decision was

made that the person knew that, “Well, I’ll just take my name off of the bid because I know I won’t get the job.” I think it was just the mindset that those were men’s jobs.

JW: So working with so many women, did that affect your job and how you approached your job at all?

KM: Well, I felt like I had to because even for awhile, most of my coworkers were men. It’s just here lately that we’ve gotten to outnumber the men, women, especially in, I don’t know about region-wise, but in our district right now, we’re just down to four people and it’s two men and two women. But until Gayle left, which Gayle left the first of May, I guess, we had three women and two men and then when Connie left just before that, we had four women and two men. When I first came, Mark was here, Doug was here. The two guys who had just retired were both men. Then Bobby Fox was here, Bob Mitchell was here, and Shelly Greene was here. Shelly was the only other woman who was here besides me at that time. I’ll have to say that Mark Pitt was really good. He did not make a difference between us. I think he liked Doug best, but he did not make a difference in us. He treated everybody the same, which I can’t say for everybody we’ve had. Anyway, but I think that because the workers in the plant were used to a man, that was hard because: “That’s not the way James would do it.”

JW: The women would say that?

KM: Yeah. “That’s not what James would do. James would come down here and he would sit in the lunchroom for two hours.” If anybody had a problem, they could come up and talk to James. Or: “That’s not the way Bobby Fox would do it. Bobby did this and Bobby did that.” And so I hadn’t been here very long and somebody from one of the Palm Beach places, the one down here on Baxter, wrote a letter to the international president and said, “When we merged our unions, you said that our service would not change,” and said, “James is retired,

Phillip has retired,” and said, “And now, the service rep that we have now is not doing things like they were doing.”

So Mark came and he said, “Can you make me a list of every time of the dates that you were down at Palm Beach?” I said, “Yeah,” because I kept them on my calendar. So I made him a list and even told what I did, if it was a grievance meeting or whatever. Then he told me why and he said, “They’re complaining that they’re not getting the service.” I said, “Nobody told me that I’m supposed to go sit in the break room during their lunchtime.” And they had four thirty-minute lunch periods. I said, “Nobody told me that that’s what I was supposed to do.” And he said, “Well, that’s what Phillip and James did.” I said, “Well.” You know, I’d just been going because it’s so close. It was like about five minutes down the street over here. I’d just been going whenever. I go once a week. I’d just been going and I go in and walk through and talk to people while they’re working, make sure everything is going okay, and then come back. Anyway, Mark, he says, “Well,” he says, “They’ve written Jack a letter and Jack, he needs to respond.”

So Mark sent the information to him and then Mark met with the president over there who was the one who had sent the letter and he says, “Look, I know that Phillip and James came over here at lunchtime on Tuesdays.” And he says, “And she can do that. She’s willing to come over there. I’ll tell her she needs to come over there on Tuesdays and sit for two hours.” He said, “Or she can come when you need her to be there.” He said, “So she can come on Tuesdays and be there for two hours, but don’t you call on Wednesday and say, ‘Somebody just got fired. We need her to come over here,’ he says, “Because she’s already been there for the week.” And so they were so used to, that’s the other thing, they were so used to the service rep doing everything. They didn’t have to have their own hierarchy in the local union because the service

rep, they were so close. They relied on the service rep to do everything. So we had to work, then start building and building the leadership and training them.

And the best ones I think we ever had were in Somerset, Kentucky. I mean, all you had to do was tell them, "Here's what we need. We're picketing Goody's. We're going to do it every Saturday from November through March. You've got a Goody's in your--. Can you?" "We'll take care of it. You don't have to come up here." And they would. Even their own problems they had, they had their own union office, which was across the street from the plant and there was somebody there through all lunch periods so if anybody needed to talk. They had a steward system and they had regular monthly meetings. It was great.

I will have to say that Doug didn't do that, but the shops that I had that Doug had before me, that was one thing he focused on was building the local leadership in that local for them to be able to handle their day-to-day problems because we never know what we're going to be doing or what we're going to be called away to do. And so you need to be able to handle your grievances and you need to be able to go in and talk to the plant manager and talk to him about what's going on. That was one thing that I learned really quick was that the old clothing locals, they had relied completely too much on their service rep and so we had to do lots of training, but we had money to do it and we did it. Any kind of training we had, we had problem getting people to come. The sewing plant down here at Baxter, I don't think they ever had a man in the leadership position. It was always women, always women. At the cutting room, the last president of that local was a woman who had worked her way up.

JW: Why do you think that was that it was mostly the women in the leadership?

KM: Well, in the sewing plant, it was because there were very few men and if there were men, they were usually the maintenance people. Sometimes there were men who would be a

presser, but very seldom did you have any man running a sewing machine or any other job. It was either a pressing job or a maintenance job. That would be where you'd find a man in a sewing plant. But I had a sewing plant now in Jamestown, Tennessee, that there are very few men in the plant to start with, but one of them is the president and he's a sewing machine operator.

JW: So things have really changed.

KM: Yes, yes.

JW: So were you ever involved in the Knoxville Women's Center?

KM: No.

JW: I'm just curious because they did some stuff with jobs, and I wasn't sure during the plant closings if people had started going to that, and they might have.

KM: Well, we worked mostly at that time with TIRN, Tennessee Industrial Renewal Network.

JW: Right.

KM: With the job closings.

JW: So were there any women's organizations that you have been a member of?

KM: No.

JW: No?

KM: No.

JW: Or any women's-type networks that you've engaged in?

KM: Not outside of church.

JW: So tell me about your church.

KM: Well, I belong to the United Methodist Women and we like to think that we are the, well, we are the mission arm of the church, local missions, international, and national missions. Even though there's a United Methodist Men, they don't do anything. They really don't. We have the studies. We have the studies on women's issues. In fact, this year is starting out to be the best year ever on women's issues because we finally got our group to use the program book and so the program book is like twelve programs that you can have. And I would say eight or nine of them are on women's issues.

JW: And what kinds of women's issues?

KM: Well, some of them, the one that I looked at recently was on domestic violence.

JW: And how long have you been a member—

KM: Of them?

JW: Of United Methodist Women.

KM: Oh shoot. Probably thirty-seven, thirty-eight years.

JW: So when did women's issues become a part of the program?

KM: I think there's always been. There's the women's department of the general church. They've always been there. It's just that, first, it's hard to get people to have a program anyway. You end up with the same people doing it over and over and over. So it's kind of hard to get people to do something other than what you would call a generic devotion. But this year, we have some younger people in there and they're willing to do things out of this book. And it gives you ideas: "If you've got fifteen minutes, do this. If you've got an hour, do this. If you've got three hours, do this." And I think that helps, it helps them. Some of them have gotten actually a little creative and have gone outside the box and actually thought of some things on their own to add to their program. So I think that's been good. I'll have to say too, I grew up in the Lonsdale

Baptist Church. When I got married, I moved to the Lonsdale United Methodist Church and we're still there. I know that I would not have developed as a woman in the church, I would not have developed as much as I have if I'd stayed at the Baptist church.

JW: Can you explain why?

KM: Yes, because as a rule, now not all Baptist churches fall into this category, but as a rule, most Baptist churches think there are certain jobs for women and then there are jobs that they can't do. Some Baptist churches believe that a woman cannot teach a man. So you can be a Sunday school teacher for children, for youth groups, for women, but a woman cannot teach a man's Sunday school class. And I know that also, I never saw a woman speak from the pulpit in our church; I never did. There was always, you know the guys that take up the offering? They'd take up the offering and they'd go out. I thought, "Well, they're just going out." I just assumed they were going out to count money, right? No. When I was a kid, they would go out and they would sit on the front porch of the church to make sure that no black people tried to come to the church. I didn't know that for a long time. I thought, "It takes four people? Have we got that many black people trying to come to church? Who are we to say you can't come to church?"

Now our church, the Methodist church now, I have spoken from the pulpit several times. We have one Sunday every year that the women have charge of the whole service. And we have an African American pastor and we have African American members. I just know that I couldn't have, I just couldn't do the things that I'm doing today if I had stayed at the Baptist church. One thing too in the church realm, our church, the conference, decided in the late [19]80s to have a conflict resolution team. We have this little newspaper. I think at that time, it probably came out once a month. There was a little thing in there that says, "We want to have one clergy and one layperson who would be willing to be trained for conflict resolution and if you're interested,

please submit a resume or your interest to whatever.” Two people applied. I was a layperson and one clergy person applied. They sent us to the Mennonite place in Lancaster, Pennsylvania, and we stayed for a week and took the training.

I don't think they would have let a woman do that in a Baptist church. That's why I say you can't say all Baptist churches because First Baptist Church here has a female pastor. She's not the main pastor, but she is an ordained minister. She used to work with the college kids, but I think she now works with community issues.

JW: And what year did you join the Methodist Church?

KM: 1973, I think.

JW: And was that a conscious decision on that part to join—

KM: Yes.

JW: Because of those issues?

KM: Not necessarily the issues, but I felt more a part of things there. And that could have been my doing as well, even though I'd grown up in the other church.

JW: But it sounds like the Methodist Church had created a different kind of culture—

KM: Yes.

JW: That you were more comfortable with.

KM: Yes.

JW: Was your husband completely on board with that decision or what was that process like of moving from one church to another in the same community?

KM: Oh well, he was on board with that. Of course, he grew up in the Methodist Church and his family, all of his family was there. So he was on board with that and I'll have to say that over the years, I've seen him grow as well because he always used to be somebody who, he kept

his opinion to himself and there are a few things that we don't talk about because we don't agree on them. So we just, I know how he feels, he knows how I feel, and we just don't talk about it. If it comes up, it comes up on the news like a burning of a flag, and he has his opinion and I think a lot of it is based on his military history. I don't have that same. Anyway, I don't think there needs to be a law that says you can't burn American flags. Is it the right thing to do? I don't know, but that doesn't make me an American because I can't see a flag. Just like the burning of a Bible in Germany in the late [19]30s, just because I don't have a Bible doesn't mean it doesn't exist and doesn't mean I don't know. They can't take that part away from me, what I know about it and what I can quote from it. Anyway, I've seen him grow and change over the years too and now he will just tell you, which I think is great.

JW: So he's become more outspoken?

KM: Yes. He used to, when we first got married, if I got him something, a shirt, and it didn't fit or he didn't like it—more than likely it would be he didn't like it. He was very conservative with his clothes, wouldn't wear anything with a stripe in it or anything with checks at all. It had to be all solid colors and a buttoned-down collar—if he didn't like it, he didn't want to take it back. He would want me to take it back because he didn't want to hurt that person's feelings at the store by bringing it back and saying, "I don't like it." He didn't want to say that. So he would get me to take it back so he wouldn't have to hurt anybody's feelings. And I said, "It wouldn't hurt their feelings. They don't care about you. If you see another shirt, fine." But he's very good now. He's very good.

JW: So did you see yourself as part of, or were you influenced by the women's movement?

KM: I think the influence that I felt by the women's movement would be that it gave me the courage to believe that I could do whatever I wanted to do. I knew I had the training. I knew that I had learned and knew what I was doing. But it's hard to, I guess, without that to compare somebody like me, I guess, put me up against Doug, because I think Doug, I think he's a great person and he's had all the experiences that he's had and all the educational experiences that he's had and just the life experiences that he's had. It's hard for, I think, somebody, hard for me to think, "How could I ever measure up to Doug?" But I think that because of the women's movement and because of the opportunities that I've had, and I'll have to say in the church and in the union movement, that I can say, "I'm just as good a rep as Doug ever was." Maybe we don't do things exactly the same way, but I can say that I can do the same things that he did and I can have a positive experience for me and it can be positive for the members I have worked with.

I think that has been, it wasn't anything I did, except I think the people who were in the women's movement, the women who were leaders in this union and other unions, they were the ones that took the bold steps. All I had to do was just follow, follow in their footsteps, and be willing to take the steps.

JW: So who were your role models?

KM: Let me think here. I'll have to say one of the role models in this union would have to be Carol Shearer and she worked in Tennessee for awhile and she was the kind of person, I guess, the one thing I don't do is I try not to curse and I try not to get so mad or so upset in a meeting that I would lose my cool. She's the kind of person who, she don't care. (laughs) Whatever she feels like, if she needs to yell, she yells. I feel like I can accomplish the same things without yelling. I sat in some meetings with her early on. She was also the president of our staff union and I sat in. I spent three weeks in the summer of 1991.

When Mark hired me, he said, "What do you see as a--?" He wanted to know my strengths and my weaknesses. And I said, "Well, weakness," I said, "I've never done any organizing." I said, "The OPEIU at TVA, that's all they had at one time was just TVA." Now just before I came in, they also took in the Department of Energy at Oak Ridge and they took in Baptist Hospital, the LPNs and the technicians. So I had some more than that, but they had been pretty much an in-house thing for a long time and they didn't need to do any organizing because TVA was hiring right and left and they had people everywhere. But I knew that this union, that was a big thing for them in the South, was organizing. And I said, "I've never done that. So I see that as a weakness."

So there was the Fieldcrest Cannon campaign was going on and he sent me over there for three weeks, and so that's the first time I met Carol. She was just really good and she wasn't the lead person, but she always told them what she thought and they all seemed to value what she told them. They didn't just blow her off and just, "Oh, it's Carol. She's going to tell us what she thinks anyway. We might as well let her just have her say and then we'll go on and do what we want to anyway." But she had already been there for awhile when I got there and she stayed for awhile after because we lost that election, but then went in again a few years after that. But just to see her in meetings with people, in house visits with potential members, to see her in negotiations with our bosses, then that, I think, gave me the feeling that you can do this too. If she can do this to our bosses, you can certainly do it with somebody who has no say over your (laughs) over your job. And so I think she would have to be one that I would say was a role model.

JW: So were you reading or watching any feminist books or films? Were those a part of things that you were encountering?

KM: No. I'd have to say no.

JW: Like *Ms.* magazine, you didn't read that?

KM: No.

JW: What about the film *Norma Rae*?

KM: I've seen that several times.

JW: Did you keep up with Crystal Lee Sutton? I guess, when did you see it for the first time?

KM: I don't remember, but it was before I came to work here.

JW: So you were already kind of familiar with that?

KM: Yeah. And really, once I had, for a short time, a true textile factory in Chattanooga. They made thread, and it looked like it could have come out of the *Norma Rae* movie. Yeah, and those people were really good people. But anyway, I just don't recall reading anything unless it was related to any of the classes I was taking at the Meany Center.

JW: So it seems like you came to some of the stuff in the women's movement through the church women talking about it and then as it came up in the union.

KM: Yeah.

JW: Can you say a little more about the Labor Council and how you've seen it shift over the years that you were involved?

KM: When I first started, Harold Woods came. He had just been elected president and I believe it was in 1980 and maybe he took over in '81, January. But anyway, he came to one of our local union meetings, one of the OPEIU union meetings, and talked to us about whether or not we would affiliate with the Labor Council. Well, that was just like a bad word for OPEIU, especially TVA people because they think they're a little bit better than everybody else, a little

notch higher in the labor chain than people who would go to the Labor Council. I think it's the TVA. They're a government agency when it benefits them and when it doesn't, they're not. But that's why some rules apply to them and some don't.

All of the white-collar unions, there was a distinction made between the white-collar groups and the blue-collar groups. White-collar unions negotiated together for a contract and the blue-collar unions negotiated. Anytime you heard anything about the blue collar, it was some kind of jurisdictional dispute. And I know we had one one time with the Teamsters and I can't remember his name now, but he was Jimmy Hoffa's, it was the last person to see Jimmy Hoffa alive and he was, what, his stepson or something. Anyway, he was coming in for that. We had a jurisdictional dispute in the warehouse: who was supposed to be doing some work. This floored me. I said, "I can't go to this," because our international rep came in and he said, "You know who's going to be at this meeting?" And I said, "No." And he rattled off the name. I said, "Who's that?" I didn't recognize. He said, "Well, he's the last person to see Jimmy Hoffa alive." I said, "I can't believe you're going to ask me to go this meeting." I said, "What am I going to tell my parents? I've been to this meeting with somebody who might have done something to Jimmy Hoffa?" But anyway, it was the culture, I guess, the company culture, that there was this group and then there was us.

So when Harold came and here's this steel worker and he works at ALCOA and he's one of the blue-collar guys. He brought Sylvia, his wife, and she was an OPEIU person, but their members were secretaries in union offices. And there was a couple other guys came and I remember one of them was a carpenter because I noticed his hands. His hands were rough. But anyway, they came and they talked to us about joining. At that time, we were going through some pretty hard negotiations. I think it was at the same time that Ronald Reagan, he was the

president and he had frozen, no wage increases for federal workers. So TVA decided then they were a federal agency so they could freeze everybody and not give anybody a wage increase. And I think the Labor Council thought this was a good time to get us because this was a good time to see that this happens to other working folks too, that this is not just something that's just happening to you that doesn't happen to everybody else.

As a result, we joined the Labor Council. Well, then the question is your membership then determined how many delegates you were entitled to have. So we had all these people. I don't know. We were entitled to seven or eight delegates. So I was one of them, and the first time we went to the Labor Council meeting, we got there right before it started and had to stand up. There were no seats available. And at that time, if you wanted a seat, you should come early because it was going to be full. It was in that big long room and the officers sat in the front and there was chairs all the way to the back. And it was full and everybody stood up. When new members were inducted or took the oath, everybody stood and took the oath too, and you raise your hand and you take the oath with the new people. It was a very happening place.

JW: Was it men and women?

KM: It was men and women, mostly men, but there were women there.

JW: And what about racially?

KM: There were a few African-American people there, not many. And the year that we joined was the first year they had the Solidarity Day in Washington, and we had two busloads from here go to Washington for that. Over the years, it got to where fewer and fewer people were coming to the meeting. So now it went from standing room only to, at the end, the last time I went—of course, I wouldn't have quit going, but our union dropped out of the AFL. So that didn't mean that we had to stop going, but they told us to stop going. The Labor Council said we

can come, all of the unions that left could come back, because it was the Teamsters and it was the laborers and the carpenters and us and the SEIU. So anyway, they said, "You can still be members." Well, they wouldn't let us. Our region would let us; Brad wouldn't let us. He had his own reasons for that. I don't necessarily agree with that, but I accepted what he decided. He knew how I felt. I expressed that to him.

So at the end, because I was the secretary and so I had to resign, but at that time, it was most of the officers were retired people because the people who were working and were union members, for whatever reason, good reason, no reason, weren't willing to be the delegates to the Labor Council. Before Suzanne was elected, the president, most all of the trustees, the guard, which they call him a guard, we call him a sergeant-at-arms, all those people were retirees.

JW: Why do you think there's been that change from what you said was a happening place to be?

KM: I think it's because—and I love Harold and Sylvia, and I had a falling out with them because they were the administrators of our grant when we had the Workers Reemployment Center, and I had a falling out with them over the money, the finances of it. And I avoided them for a year and a half so I wouldn't have to talk to them. (laughs) I don't think they ever knew that I was furious with them. But anyway, after about a year and a half, I decided: "They don't even know you're mad. You're only hurting yourself. So you might as well just get over it. Just know what happened and go on."

But I think it's because the two of them together, when we first started, when the OPEIU first started, they had all kinds of working committees. They had lots of people involved. At the end, nobody was allowed to do anything on their own. It was dictated by Harold and Sylvia, mostly Sylvia. And I think she felt like over the years, that she had had to prove herself more

than anybody else would have had to prove themselves. And I think she just let it take full hold of her and she couldn't help it. She wanted to be in charge of everything, but then she couldn't get it done because she wouldn't ask anybody else to help or if she did, it was at such a late date, you couldn't get anything done. I love them, but I think that's what happened and people saw the Labor Council not doing anything and not being much of a presence in town anymore. Now, people running for elective office, they don't care whether they get the Labor Council endorsement because it don't mean anything.

JW: And it used to mean something?

KM: It used to mean something. And I think that hopefully, Suzanne, she's having to break down these barriers with some of the trade unions. Teamsters, they're giving her a fit. They won't call her back. They won't talk to her.

JW: She's still having to do that?

KM: Still, still. But I think that's what happened, and so the only people they could get to run for office--. And it's sad when like the plumbers down the street, their representative there is a retired guy. He's been retired for twenty years. He's an old guy. I mean, he probably retired when he was fifty-five and it's sad that no actively-employed plumbers or pipe fitters are willing to come one night a month to the Labor Council to make it work, that it's just all retired people. That's the only ones you can get. Or they got Chris, who was out here with the UFCW [United Food and Commercial Workers], to run for an office. He's not even in town most of the town. He's doing organizing for the UFCW and he's usually in Alabama or Georgia or somewhere, wherever they've got a campaign going on, and so he can't even be there most of the time. So you've got either retired people or people who can't be there. So what good does that do to have somebody holding an office if they're never going to be able to be there?

JW: Do you think that what's happened locally also reflects what's been happening more nationally with the labor movement?

KM: I think probably. I know that just in our own union, the things that we used to be really involved in, we're not anymore. And I know that things, needs change and priorities change, but basics don't change. I don't know if you've seen the pictures hanging up. We need to take them down. When we were trying to organize the K-Mart distribution center in Greensboro, North Carolina, I don't know how many times we took busloads of people over there, walked through the riot police down the street, down the road that the distribution center is on, had people who agreed up front to be arrested to go where the police had told them they couldn't go. We've been in Macy's in downtown Atlanta when we had our regional meeting and it would be somebody had a dispute or a men's suit manufacturer was having a dispute with Macy's. We'd been in there where there were so many of us in there that they locked the doors and wouldn't let anybody else come in, no customers, nobody. And we had our little rally inside the store. We used to do those kind of things all the time. Goody's, we used to picket Goody's every Saturday, rain or shine or snow, when we were trying to get a contract with them.

We don't do those things anymore, which those things kept our membership involved. It kept something exciting happening all the time, something that wasn't necessarily something that happens in the four walls of their plant, but here's the union's doing this. Let's go help them. We don't do those kind of things anymore. So I think our people aren't as excited as they used to be and I think that's happened with everybody's union. The carpenters here, they've given us all kind of a black eye, not for what they're doing, but for how they're doing it. They have a beef with Covenant Health over who's building their facilities and things like that. And they don't say, "Shame on Covenant Health." They'll put somebody's name up there or something that has

nothing to do seemingly with Covenant Health. It makes you not think of Covenant Health. There's all kinds of back and forth in the newspaper about that. I haven't seen them in a long time.

JW: I think I saw it at Calhoun's last time I was here, maybe a month ago or something.

KM: Well, I haven't seen them. I used to see them out, some on Pellissippi Parkway. I saw them for a long time. They used to be right on the corner where the main post office is at Weisgarber Road. They were on that corner right there. Judy's, that's abandoned now, they were there for a long time. And then I've seen them a couple other places, but I haven't seen them anywhere that I've been lately. But I think that everybody's involved doing their own little thing that's affecting their own particular job and there's nothing going on to interest them in what's going on outside.

They get the, what do they call them, the three issues that they want to talk about all the time are guns, gays, and abortion. When the elections come up, those are the three hot-button issues, and it's hard then to get people to listen because that's what they want to talk about: "Well, where does he stand on--?" "Al Gore wants to take my gun away." Or: "They want to give money to Planned Parenthood." Those kind of things. I think we can't even get their attention anymore. We used to have people call over here and they'd say, "Who's the union supporting in the election?" Even retirees would call and say, "Who does the union want us to vote for in the election?" We don't get those calls anymore. And we [used] to have a big group of retirees from the clothing factories around. I don't even know if they've been coming lately mainly because they're getting so few of them and the ones that are left, they're so feeble that maybe they can't come. But I haven't seen them in a long time.

But I think that it's like anything else. It's what do you want to make time for? What's important enough to you that you want to make time for it? Whether it's something at church or it's something with the union or something with the labor movement, it's what are you willing to do? What are you willing to give up some of your time for? And I think that that's not high on people's priorities anymore. I think that they think there's nothing they can do about it anyway, so why should they get involved in it? And especially like the Labor Council now where I think it would be so much of a rebuilding that maybe people think it's beyond help.

JW: So have you been involved in local politics? Have you gotten involved in campaigns?

KM: Oh yeah, yeah. We were real active in Bob Becker's campaigns when he ran both times for city council, Madeleine [Rogero's] first time running for mayor, and now that, plus other. We were, through the Democratic Women and through here and tagging on with the Labor Council, involved in Sam Alexander's race for state legislature, and somebody else who was running for state Senate. I can see him, but I can't think of his name and I always have a problem remembering his name. But anyway, those kind of things.

JW: And have you been involved in Democratic Women?

KM: Oh yeah. I just recently had to resign as the secretary, but I'm a charter member of the Knoxville Democratic Women's Club.

JW: Oh, and when did it start?

KM: I think 2000, 1999 or 2000, and I was the first president of that club. And then after about two years, then Betty Reddick, she became president. She's still the president. But I had to resign because they meet the first Monday of every month. One of the new places I just took is in

Hopkinsville, Kentucky, which is about a four-and-a-half-hour drive. They have their union meetings the first Monday of every month. So I can't be here for that anymore because of that.

JW: Well, what was the motivation to start that group?

KM: Well, my parents were both—oh, to start that group?

JW: Well, and tell me about your parents too.

KM: Or to be a Democrat, yeah, a Democrat. We were brought up Democrats. And my mother, I told you she was the chief clerk at the election commission and of course, until just recently it was always a Democratic majority. So the chief clerk or whatever they called Greg McKay, I can't remember what his title was, was always held by a Democrat.

JW: And had your family pretty much been Democrats or was there a time when they were--? Or do you know that history if they were Republicans and then shifted? A lot of families in this area, I think, did change their party affiliation in the [19]30s to Democrats.

KM: No, I think my parents have always been Democrats and Allen's parents and grandparents have always been Democrats. That's one of the ties they had too to each other were that because they had the Democrat for the wards and the precincts. They had the precinct meetings and they were always listed in the little book, the little book of ward and precinct chairmen and members.

JW: So why did women get together to start Tennessee Democratic Women?

KM: Oh, the Knoxville Democratic Women? Well, there was already an existing women's Democratic club, but they met at night. So the need was there for one that met at lunchtime so that women who worked and maybe had to take care of their family or whatever after they got off work could meet at lunchtime. They would serve a lunch so you didn't have to worry about picking up a lunch and bringing it. You could have lunch when you got here. They

would hold the meeting for not more than one hour and that would maybe attract a different group of people than went to the night club meeting. And I don't remember, I don't even know the name of the night club. But for a long time, I went to the Northwest Democratic Club meeting with my Dad after my mother passed away. I would go with him. He wanted to go and he didn't want to go by himself. So I went with him for a long time.

But anyway, it was Betty Reddick and Suzanne Coile and Sylvia Woods and me and Connie Johnsy. I don't remember if Debbie Black is one of the original members or not, but there was five or six of us that met and talked about starting this club, and so we did. We meet upstairs here.

JW: And how many women come out for that?

KM: We usually have about thirty people who come at lunchtime, yeah, sometimes more, but usually we have about thirty. And Betty has done an excellent job of getting people to come and be speakers. Of course, she's got the network. She knows people everywhere. And then once a year, we have the Women of Faith luncheon and that started because the Republicans wanted to say that Democrats weren't people of faith and so that ticked us off. So we decided, "We will show you." So we have had the Women of Faith luncheon. I think it's about eight or nine years we've had that. And we have, last year, I believe it was Sharon Lee. She was one of the Tennessee Supreme Court justices, I believe. She was the one who spoke. We've had Mary Beth Leibowitz, who is a criminal court justice and in fact, she even talked about her background. Her father, I think, was a union member, and talked about his labor experience. And then, of course, she's Jewish and so then that all tied together. Anyway, so we have that every year and we usually have at least a hundred people come. We have it at the foundry.

JW: In those monthly meetings at the luncheons, what's the setup? Is there an agenda? Are people talking about certain issues? Do you plan something like that?

KM: Well, there's always a speaker. Well, I won't say always, but there's maybe only a couple of months a year that we don't have a speaker. They have Boys State and then they have Girls State. Well, we've started giving a scholarship to send somebody and they know that they're going because of the Democratic Women. The Democratic Women are sending them. So for a couple of years, we did two scholarships. We did one for Fulton because it's in our area and then we have a member who donates some money for the scholarship and because she lives in south Knoxville, we have always given that scholarship to somebody from South Doyle. We do those kind of things. We do a lot of giving money, time, and other things to different charities, primarily Mobile Meals. Then we have taken on the cleaning of the women's statues on the Market Mall. We do that once every three months, clean the statues, clean all the bird poop off them and whatever else gets on them, just dirt and grime from every day.

JW: So were you involved in the group of women who were helping to get the money and organize around this statue?

KM: Oh yeah, because, yeah, there's a brick up there with my name on it, one with my mother's name on it, and one with my daughter's name on it. So yeah, we were.

JW: Can you say why you think that statue is important?

KM: Well, because Tennessee is the state that put the women's right to vote over the top. In fact, we went not long ago to the, I don't remember, was it *Petticoats and Politics*? A one-woman show up at the Hilton Hotel. It was really good. She portrayed four or five women who had made an impact on women's rights and women's right to vote and all that. But anyway, I thought that was important because it was an east Tennessee woman, I mean, an east Tennessean

who changed his vote at the last minute to what his mother said he ought to do, the right thing, and changed his rose from a red one to a yellow one. So yeah, I think that is important. It was important for me, for my daughter to be part of that too. And every time she goes up there, she looks and shows her daughter now, who's too small to know, but if she keeps on every time she goes up onto the Market Mall, then she'll know one day: "That's my mama's name and that's my grandma's name."

JW: And she'll know that history.

KM: Yeah, yeah.

JW: Do you participate in the, is it a yearly gathering in Market Square for women to march?

KM: I haven't been able to the last couple of times. I went to the first one that they did right after the statue was put up, but I haven't been able to go the last couple of times. It was good. And a couple of times, we've done the MLK parade, the Democratic Women. We always have somebody, I don't even know who provides the, but it's a Cadillac convertible and we have one really old lady in our group and she's in her nineties, a little black lady, and they always let her ride in the car because she couldn't be in the parade if she wasn't. But she's good and she comes. If she's well, she comes.

JW: Well, I don't have any more questions. Is there anything else that you want to add or anything else you want to talk about?

KM: I don't think so. And I told Brad when you were coming, I said, "I can't imagine what I would have to say that she would be interested in." (laughs)

JW: Well, you've had lots and I'm interested in all of it.

KM: I just think that I have seen, and I don't know, I guess if everybody takes a look back in a situation like this and can look back, you can see how you've grown and how you have changed and how you've changed your opinion on some things. I'll just throw this out, but when Osama bin Laden was killed, Allen said, "Well, I guess there's a lot of people happy today." And I said, "I know one that's not." And he said, "Oh, who?" And I said, "God." I said, "Because he was his child, too." I don't think we should ever be glad somebody is dead. We can not like what they did, we can hate what they did, but still they're not any different from us as far as who we're important to and all that.

Anyway, I think I've just seen myself grow in church. I've seen myself grow in here, do contracts by myself. It's harder because you have to talk and write too, keep notes too, which is kind of hard. I've seen people come and go, staff people, members. I've seen some die, which is never good. I had one to die this week at the plant down here on Western Avenue, just died in the bathroom. I have had one place where somebody actually got killed on the job, crushed. I have had places that make furniture, places that make clothing, bowling balls, car parts, all kinds of car part. I have a place now that makes inflators for air bags. The other place makes the air bags themselves. One place that makes the whole, the door panels and the dash for the insides of cars. Places that wash people's clothes, that wash linens of all kinds. Let's see.

It's just been a very fulfilling twenty years.

JW: Well, thank you for sharing a little bit about it.

KM: Okay. I've enjoyed it.

END OF INTERVIEW

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