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

Interview U-0499
Sylvia Woods
26 May 2010

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ABSTRACT – SYLVIA WOODS

Sylvia Woods grew up in Knoxville, Tenn. and has been a lifelong activist in the labor movement there. She became involved in community organizations in the 1970s, working with the Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) and the Democratic Party. Her husband was a member of the Knoxville-Oak Ridge Area Central Labor Council, AFL-CIO, and she began participating in the organization through the Office and Professional Employees International Union and eventually served as the Financial Secretary-Treasurer. She has served on many boards of organizations in Knoxville, including the Family Crisis Center, the Community Mediation Center, the Knoxville Women's Center, and the Knoxville Council of PTAs. Sylvia discusses her childhood in Knoxville; courting and marrying her husband Harold Woods; the births of her children; becoming president of the Parent-Teachers Association; her participation on the Labor Council; her parents' relationship and domestic violence; her views on work and supporting oneself; lobbying her local school board; integration and the civil rights movement in Knoxville; involvement in the Knoxville Women's Center; women's equal rights; involvement in the Family Crisis Center; involvement in Democratic Party; memory of PATCO and Pittston strikes; importance of the labor movement; support of Barack Obama for president; advice for young women. This interview is part of the Southern Oral History Program's project to document the women's movement in the American South.

FIELD NOTES – SYLVIA WOODS
(compiled May 27, 2010)

Interviewee: Sylvia Woods

Interviewer: Jessie Wilkerson

Interview Date: May 26, 2010

Location: Knoxville, TN

THE INTERVIEWEE. Sylvia Woods, who has lived in Knoxville, TN, almost all of her life, became involved in community organizations in the 1970s, working with the Parent-Teacher Association (PTA) and the Democratic Party. Her husband Harold was a member of the Knoxville-Oak Ridge Area Central Labor Council, AFL-CIO, and she soon joined the organization through the Office and Professional Employees International Union and eventually served as the Financial Secretary-Treasurer. She has served on many boards, including the Family Crises Center, the Community Mediation Center, the Knoxville Women's Center, and the Knoxville Council of PTAs.

THE INTERVIEWER. Jessie 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, from the late 1960s through the 1990s.

DESCRIPTION OF THE INTERVIEW. Sylvia and I met at the Knoxville-Oak Ridge Area Central Labor Council, AFL-CIO office in Knoxville. We were the only people there, so it was an ideal location for recording. There is one interruption when Sylvia needed to take a phone call.

CONTENT OF THE INTERVIEW. Sylvia discusses her childhood in Knoxville; courting and marrying her husband Harold Woods; the births of her children; becoming president of the PTA; her involvement in the Labor Council; her parents' relationship and domestic violence; her views on work and supporting oneself; lobbying her local school board; integration and the civil rights movement in Knoxville; involvement in Democratic Party; memory of PATCO and Pittston strikes; importance of the labor movement; her support of Barack Obama for president; advice for young women.

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Interviewer: Jessica Wilkerson

Interview date: May 26, 2010

Location: Knoxville, Tennessee

Length: 1 disc, approximately 96 minutes

Interviewee: Sylvia Woods

Jessica Wilkerson: This is Jessie Wilkerson and I'm with Sylvia Woods in Knoxville, Tennessee on May 26, 2010. So Sylvia, can we just start by talking about your childhood and your early life experiences?

Sylvia Woods: I have always lived in Knoxville, except for maybe four or five months that I followed my husband in the military to San Antonio, Texas, outside of that. And most of the time I've lived in South Knoxville. I'm the oldest child; I have a brother that's two years younger than me, and then a sister who's five and a half years younger than me. And then my next sister is eight years younger than her. So we have a whole stream. And then eight years later, my mother had a son. So there's five of us children, and my mother still lives; she's ninety years old, and lives in the same house that I grew up in. And we all rotate around her. We call her high maintenance, because it takes all of us to take care of her. And she lives by herself, and she--so I look forward to a long life--and she manages her own money, and she just can't see to drive, so we take her wherever she needs to go. So. Very loved--my mother loved us all. My mother and father was divorced when I was about fourteen. So then we had some rough years.

But I had my husband, who was my boyfriend. And he would make sure that I got where I needed to go and would always back me up. We married in 1961. October

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14, 1961. He was in the military at the time, was a Green Beret in the Army, and we planned our marriage so that when he got out of basic training, then we would get married. Because if you went into service married, you drew less than you did if you got married after you got in the service. So we made that plan. We dated from the time I was fourteen till the time I was almost twenty. Before we got married. He's the love of my life, and has always backed me up and made it possible for me to do all the things that I'm able to do.

Our first son was born in December of 1965. Harold. Then our second son was born in September 1967. And I guess when I really got the most active outside of church and Bible school and things like that was when they started in school. I was always anxious to work in the PTA. So that's where I got my start. That's where I learned about politics, because my family was not political and neither was Harold's. We didn't know much about politics, or activism either, outside of the fact that I wanted to be a part of the school, and I wanted to be able to make things happen at school. I'd always been a timid person, all my life, until I guess I got in the PTA--when my boys got old enough to be in first and second grade, and got involved with PTA.

The first year I was president of the PTA, I was supposed to be vice president. And the president got pregnant and couldn't do it, and so I was just thrown into it all of a sudden. And Mary Lou Horner, who was a commissioner here in Knoxville, called me that summer and said, "What can I do to help you?" I'll never forget it. It meant so much, because I did not have a clue as to where to go. And she brought me in--now it'd end up that she's a Republican and I'm a Democrat--but because of my husband going to ALCOA to work and becoming a steelworker, we'd actually then learned what politics

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was and who voted for you, and so I've worked ever since then. Harold's retired now from ALCOA, but all those years, he was very active in the Steelworkers' union, and here at this labor council, which just kind of put me into that.

I learned through my PTA to go to school board meetings to listen what was going on, to be able to lobby, to make decisions, and to lead people. And that was important stuff. How to hold a meeting, parliamentary procedure; we had Robert's Rules of Order schools every year, and then I was the president of the Knoxville City Council of PTAs, of all the city. Later they merged with the county when the school system merged; the county council and the city council merged. And I still go back to Founders' Day in February, and see what's going on with the PTA, and I still serve on the PTA Clothing Center Board, which was a part of the city PTA council.

I'm still a member of that board and still have been all these years; I get re-elected every time it comes up. We don't have term limits, so it helps to have some history when you're there at a meeting, and also to learn all the new things. And it keeps me in touch with the school system. Even though I'm a grandmother and have grandchildren in school, I get things from the PTA Clothing Center about uniforms and the things that they're lobbying for today that we did back then.

I brought that activism and history to this labor council in 1980. I became a union member in August 1980 here, so it's almost thirty years, and in cleaning out boxes and stuff, I found my paperwork, even in 1979. My husband was the president of this labor council and he needed help. He needed to get out newsletters, and he's very active, and he needed that backup. So I became the secretary of the labor council here, and the bookkeeper. And so that's what I've done. That also throws me into marches, and

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rallies, and pickets, and boycotts, and strike support, and lobbying. All those things that's important to people. To working people.

My daddy was a small businessman, so I only heard that side of it. After I came to work here, and with my husband's activism for people, I learned a whole lot from him. I learned to be able to do things. The one thing I feel like that I got to do that sometimes women don't get to do, is it didn't matter: he had my back. Nobody could do anything to me. I couldn't be fired; I wouldn't lose my job and not be able to eat or have a place to live, or take care of my children. Because of my husband, we always lived on his salary. And so we made things happen within our family, with those kinds of things. And I think what hurts women a lot of the time is that they are afraid of what might happen to them if they get out on the front line, if they go talk to people. But it also gave me that confidence that I could talk to anybody. My husband taught me that. He says with the mayor, or "So they're the president? So what? They're people, just like you, and your opinions are just as important as theirs." And so I get to live by that. That's a good thing for me.

Both my children are in the union, and both of them take active parts in the union. My youngest son is a business agent for the Bakery Workers. And he's just really so good: he understands contracts; he understands grievances; he understands people; he knows how to look ahead at what's going on, and he's really good.

My other son, my oldest son, is [an] electrician. He's not an officer in his union, but he serves on committees and is active. Then here at this labor council, they both are delegates here, and so we can work as a family. We do lots of things as a family.

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Now I registered to vote when I got old enough to vote. At that time, you had to be twenty-one to vote. Now people get to vote when they're eighteen, but I had to be twenty-one to vote. I guess that I've never missed an election. If I did, I didn't know. Especially now, that we have early vote, there's no problem. Harold and I usually vote as soon as the polls open, about fifteen minutes, thirty minutes, or at least an hour, when the polls first open. We laugh and say if something happens to us before Election Day, we've already cast our vote. It's going to count.

So we took our boys with us--he would take one, I would take the other--into the machines when you would pull the little levers, or pull the handle across. Even as children, [clears throat] excuse me, we would let them pull the lever, because we wanted them to understand how important it was to vote. When Kids Voting came to Knox County, I served on that committee because I knew how important it was for kids to learn to vote. And not to be afraid. Even adults are afraid to go in and vote sometimes, because they don't know what those machines are going to do, they're afraid they'll punch the wrong thing. But if you start voting when you're a child, it's not as fearful to you. So our boys always vote.

JW: So can I ask you to go back a little bit?

SW: Sure.

JW: And when your parents were divorced, did your mother work? Or how did the family support itself?

SW: Okay, at that point there was four of us, and my little sister was a baby. My mother had to go to work. My daddy had his own business, but he gave very little money, I think, something like twenty-five dollars a month to us four. So we had it very

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hard. My mother went to work as a waitress, and she would be sick, but she would go on and work. My mother has a real work ethic. And like I said, even at ninety, she washes her clothes, and washes her dishes, and keeps her house much better than I do. Because in her day, that was what you did. Your house was your domain, that's what you did. Me, I'd rather just walk out and go to a rally, or go meet with some people, and help make a plan for something. But I was the oldest, and all of us kids, when we got old enough to work, went to work somewhere. Mama still believes that, and I believe that. I've got a grandchild, son, that's sixteen, and I've told him a number of times now: "Stephen, it's time to get a job, baby. Work does something for you." Drawing that first paycheck does something for you.

He's real active with tennis and with the Boy Scouts; he's going to get his Eagle this year. So I told him "Go on and get your Eagle award, and then we're going to put you to work." He just laughs about it; his daddy laughs about it, but I don't think work hurts a child at all. My youngest granddaughter is my oldest son's daughter, and they mow the yard--they live next door to me--and they mow the yard, and rake the grass, and they do all kinds of things. He teaches her how to work.

I'm real proud of both my boys. They work. I've been lucky enough to work part-time and to work my own schedule. And so that leaves me the time to be able to do all the active things that I want to do. So that's real good. But you've got to know how to work and work. My husband: very hard worker. And the boys picked that up too.

JW: Where was your first job?

SW: I worked at Howard Johnson's restaurant on the Chapman Highway. It's where the Hardee's is now. It was a restaurant there and I worked as a waitress. And I

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worked at Regas restaurant when I went to UT. And I've always said, if I really needed to go back to work, had to work somewhere, I'd get me a restaurant work, because you get to take your money home with you every night. And talk to people and serve people, and that kind of thing. And I know they don't make a whole lot of money, but I don't have to have a whole lot of money. I've took care of what I have had.

We live in the same house that we bought in 1964. And we built onto it. We made the decision a long time ago that we would stay in our house and save our money, and go wherever we wanted to go. And do whatever we wanted to do. Pay our house off. That's what we've done, and that freed us up then, not to have those big payments. We would drive our cars until after they were paid for. When you first bought a house, when we bought our house, you had to make enough in one week to make your house payment. Draw enough, not just make it, but draw enough in one week. And then that would be like 25% of your income would go for a house payment. That left you the other 75% for all the other things: your insurance, your food, your car, whatever.

And I think that was a wise decision. Because after that, when people got to where two people were working in the family, they counted that 25% of both salaries, that means you both had to keep working, and if one of you got laid off you'd be in trouble. People have bought houses much over their ability to pay for them, and that's why they're in trouble right now. Yes, my husband was laid off, or up to the point of being laid off, and he would work extra jobs and that kind of thing so that we paid our house off early, so we didn't have that worry. And we still live there.

JW: Can you tell me what your experience was like at the University of Tennessee? When you went to--you went to UT, right?

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SW: I went to UT [University of Tennessee]; I've also been to Pellissippi, some classes there, and to George Meaney Center, I took some college classes there too. And then you got credit for your experiences as well. When I went to UT, I didn't like it a whole lot. It was hard. Because, like I said, I was the oldest, so I was the keeper of the children while Mama worked. I had to get my lessons, and then of course buildings from one place to another, a lot of walking. And I had really no social part of the university. And at that point, Harold was in the Army, and so he wasn't here to be with me. So I took a two-year business course. It was like an Associates Degree back in those days. I had never thought I would ever get to go to college. But my guidance counselor at school said, "Sylvia, you can get a scholarship. You can make good grades, you can get a scholarship."

And I did, I got a scholarship; it was two hundred dollars. And it paid my tuition. Almost my tuition, for that whole year. It was in that first year that I went. The second year that I went--. And all this time now, I'm working at Regas restaurant on the weekends and at night, and that kind of thing. After the, well, I want to say third quarter, but the first quarter--. I think we were in quarters then, instead of semesters, at that point. So it would've been the fourth quarter. I got married; that was when we got married. And then I quit. I didn't continue on. I always said if I needed to work, and I needed a degree, I'd go back to school and get it. I did take some night courses after that, but I never finished. And I hate that, because everybody now has degrees, but I've had that life experience and the life and all the fun that it really hasn't cost me anything.

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JW: Can you tell me some more about what the projects were you worked on with the PTA? Like what were some of the major campaigns that you saw? And what year did you start that work?

SW: Look on that paper and see. Well the year I started, let's see. My son would've been seven, I think was the year that I became president at Galbraith School, which is the elementary school that I went to. That's where I went to school, too. And the same principal, isn't that funny? So he was born in '65, and if he was seven, that would've been '72. That's when he started. Harold and I were both very active in the Cub Scouts. Because here we had one little den of Cub Scouts, and the lady wasn't going to be the leader anymore. They didn't have any leaders, and so I told Harold, I said, "We need to do something. We've got these two boys."

So we picked up and turned that one partial den of Cub Scouts into five active dens of Cub Scouts, different groups of Cub Scouts. And we did lots of things with them. Of course we did the Pinewood Derby stuff that Cub Scouts do, and we helped them raise money, and we took them on their first plane ride. We had them earn enough money to take a flight, and we flew from Knoxville to Atlanta. One set of parents was already in Atlanta, had a car--we rented a car--and took them to Six Flags. Spent the whole day on a Saturday, and caught the plane back that night. You had to go and come, and a different day, so we went [at] like six o'clock in the morning, and we came back at twelve-thirty in the night. The plane came down in Chattanooga, and then came down in Knoxville. But we wanted these boys to experience things, so we did that.

And we spent the night in the cave at Lost Sea. I saw one of my scouts the other day, Neil Green that owns the catering--All Location Catering, over here on Central

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[Avenue]--and my sixteen-year-old grandson is selling ads for his annual. Next year he's on the yearbook committee, so I said, "Let's stop over here and see if Neil wants to buy an ad." So of course Neil's telling Stephen about us all spending the night in the cave, and how dark it was and how dirty it was, and we came out, but about how much fun it was. So we did a lot of those kinds of things.

JW: So what were some of the major issues that the school board, and the PTA?

SW: One of the things that I remember about school board meetings, it was so funny. Every year the milk contract would come up. And now they met in the old Knoxville High School over here on Fifth Avenue. Every year, the coal contract and the milk contract would come up, and it was interesting listening to them negotiate on those contracts. One year, they actually negotiated the teachers' first contract that they negotiated.

I sat all summer listening to that, and it was like--by that time, I had come to work here, so I knew a little bit about union contracts--and it was interesting to me how little negotiating ability the teachers had. They knew what they wanted, but they didn't know about negotiating. And the man that would negotiate for the school system, they would agree to something, but then they had to talk about it. They would separate and talk about it, and when they come back, the teachers would say "No, no, we can't agree to that." It's like they gave no power to their negotiator. And they would negotiate things like, "If I lost my ring down the sink, who's responsible for opening the sink to get it out?" or "If somebody hits my car in the parking lot, who's responsible for that?"

And I'm thinking: people! Talk about the pensions, talk about healthcare, talk about salary. Talk about continuing education. It was an interesting experience sitting

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and watching all of that happen. I went to every school board meeting for seven years during that time. Even before I was chairman of the council and afterward, it was really interesting. And that was one of the things that Mary Lou told me to do, and told us all to do: you have to go to the school board meetings. You have to know who these people are. You have to know how they act, how they interact with each other, what's important to them. And it was the old county commission, which was a three-person commission. We would go to all of those county meetings because, even though we lived in the city, the county had an effect on the tax rate and the money that went into the schools. So I would go to those meetings, and go to the city council meetings. And that way, I knew all the people in office, and they knew who I was. And that opens doors. You have to be active if you want to be able to get in those doors and able to talk to people. You have to learn how to talk to people. You can't go in demanding; you go in and discuss to get your way. And have your facts with you.

I remember Sarah Moore Green being on the school board. And I don't remember what the issue was, but whatever it was, I had an opinion on it. I called her up, as I called all the school board members, and I talked to her about the issue, and I asked her to look at it in this viewpoint and that viewpoint. And the next school board meeting that we went to, she argued my point. With my words. That taught me right then and there: you can't get anything done if you don't speak up. If you don't give reasons for it, and if you don't lay it out in the proper manner. I have remembered that all these years: that one person can make a difference. One person can give a point of view, if it's a reasonable point of view of course, and give the evidence that goes with it. And the next

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time you hear that person speak, they may be saying your words. Which meant you got your point across.

So never think that just one voice can't be heard. One voice can be heard. They can. And even politicians will tell you that "Oh, we've got all these people that call me." They might've had ten people that called them. But ten people is a lot of people, if each one calls on their own and expresses their view. And same thing with Sarah Moore. She'd say, "I've got all these calls," and they say, the very words she used were my words--that was my call! That she was talking about, and yet she was saying she'd gotten all these calls, so. Yeah. I learned that.

JW: Yeah. I think I told you, I'm from this area, and I grew up in Corryton, and I remember, as a kid, the busing became a major issue. I was from the Gibbs community, but I was in the group that was bused to Holston. So I wonder what you can say about some of those dynamics, what you remember about that.

SW: Well, it happened between the time I was in school and the time my children were in school. I've always been in South Knoxville so we didn't have that much busing. I went to school my first year at Giffin, which was a city school. It's now closed. I rode the city bus from my house to the school, and I was late every morning. Every morning, I'd have to go to the office, and sit, 'til the principal would fuss at me, before I could go to my class. But the bus--. The way it ran, and the way my mother got me there, they were all late. Now my husband is early. He thinks you have to be there thirty minutes early. I think if you're there after the minutes are read, you're okay.

I loved my teacher, but I didn't like their food. [It] was different from what my mother cooked. I was not used to eating out somewhere--course, you didn't eat out much

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then. And the next year, they told my parents that I had to go to Galbraith, which was the county school, because the line between my house and the house next door. So one was the city, and one was the county. So I went to Galbraith. It went to the eighth grade, and not just the sixth grade with the middle school. I loved it over there. They had mashed potatoes and steak and things that I was used to, green beans, and things that I was eating. Not a bunch of casseroles. Mama never fixed casseroles, so I didn't let one food touch the other. Nothing mixed, everything was separate; you didn't mix anything. And so I loved it over there; I liked it a lot.

JW: Well, and I should be more clear about--.

SW: The busing.

JW: The integration.

SW: But I really didn't experience it, because the major problems--. I remember one day, Harold and I were downtown, and there was a group of people out in front of the Tennessee Theater, holding signs. They was having a demonstration. We never had been involved in anything like that, and we watched it for a little while, and came on home, because we didn't want to get--. You know, you always hear about the shootings and fighting and all that kind of stuff. It was never on television, and it never was in the paper that we saw; we watched for it. And we thought, "You know what? They didn't publicize it." It might've been on the national news, but locally, nobody mentioned it. So that people didn't cause more disturbance or whatever. And I do remember them talking about the lunch rooms, because my mother worked in the ten-cent store downtown; they had lunchrooms--and Miller's had lunch rooms downtown. But I never

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had been around black people, and so I didn't know--. I mean they were just people to me, I had no problem with them.

Now my mother was afraid. And still is, to some point, because she grew up in that generation where you didn't go to school together. It's a fearful thing for her.

JW: Mmm-hmm. So the demonstration you're talking about, was--.

SW: Gay Street.

JW: Yeah, was it a civil rights--?

SW: Yes.

JW: Okay.

SW: I think they were trying to make a point about the Tennessee Theater. Now, when I was a kid, I went to the Bijou Theater, but the black kids had to go to the third balcony. Now I remember that. They had to go outside, and the fire escape is still there.
[Phone rings]

Now, Harold's family. Harold's daddy worked at Williams Lime Plant. His grandfather actually came from Virginia with the equipment and set the lime plant up. So Harold's daddy worked with black men a lot. They would come to his house and sit down at their table and eat with them. Harold's daddy would get mad if they wanted to sit outside; he'd say no, you come and sit at my table. Harold grew up in an area. They were all poor, and it didn't matter if you were black or white. They were all poor. So that comes to a lot of his background.

I never thought I was poor until Mama and Daddy was divorced. We weren't poor; my daddy had his own business, we were the first to have gas lawnmowers, we were the first to have televisions, we were the first to have Schwinn bicycles on our

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street. Now, we thought we were rich. We weren't, but we were richer than everybody else on our street. But then it got to be hard when I was a teenager. My brothers and sisters didn't realize it, but I did, because we didn't have the things that we had had before. And Mama had to work, which was something different.

JW: Mmm-hmm. So your sense of the civil rights movement in Knoxville was you saw things happening, but you weren't really--.

SW: I wasn't really a part of it; I was probably sixteen, seventeen years old.

Of course, at that point I would've never gotten involved in any kind of riot, or my husband wouldn't have, either. I mean we could see it, but we weren't really a part of it, and knowledgeable of it.

JW: Can you tell me a little bit about your involvement in the Knoxville Women's Center?

SW: We tried to help women who wanted to go to work or needed to work, with training, with the clothes closet--I think there's a clothes closet now for women who need work clothes, things to go for interviews and things like that--we had a clothes closet like that. The problem with the Women's Center is that it takes money to run a center, and you have to have grants to do it with. The last part that we did was working, like teaching them how to use the computer, teaching them the interview skills. All of that kind of thing. Mary Lou Horner was on that board; I was trying to think of some of the other people. As a matter of fact, I threw a whole bunch of stuff away yesterday that I had kept all these years, in my cleaning out stuff, I threw a bunch of that away.

I was on the mediation board. I was the treasurer on it when it first started and served on that for about five years. You know, you rotate off of some of these boards.

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It's still going, it's a real important thing. Mediation is an important skill, and an important way to resolve problems without having to go to court and sue all the time. Costs you a lot of money. Mediation doesn't cost that much and you can come to some kind of agreement. Most of the time, people just want to have their say. And a mediation gives you that opportunity to do that, without it costing you a whole lot of money, or hurtful feelings. Just get it out and talk about it. So that was a good thing.

JW: So were you with the Women's Center when it--.

SW: I wasn't there when it--.

JW: When it started?

SW: No I wasn't there when it started; and I wasn't there when it finished. I was there in between.

JW: Okay. And you were there for about, let's see, ten years. So what kind of women was this for? Like what kind of--was there outreach, to certain types of women, or what was the mission of the Knoxville Women's Center?

SW: Well, it was to help women. Mostly with the work. It wasn't like teaching them how to cook or sew or anything like that; it was to be able to get them into the work force, give them that little sisterly help, that backup, somebody to talk to, somebody to tell them who to go see, those kinds of things.

JW: Mmm-hmm. So were these women who were single and trying to raise families?

SW: Mostly. That's mostly women that were single. Some had children. That was why they needed to work.

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JW: Mmm-hmm. And what about welfare? Were they trying to get off welfare, or was there some sort of, like were there ever discussions about that?

SW: I don't know. I don't remember exactly--. It's been a long time. I'm sure that if there were benefits available, we would've steered them in that direction. I mean, you have to have some sort of income to be able to look for a job, or to even get started in a job. I looked down here on the corner at Fifth Avenue when they're trying to get a place for homeless people. If you don't have a home, how can you take a bath, how can you eat a meal, how can you have clean clothes, to even go apply for a job? It's not permanent housing for homeless, it's housing for homeless to get started. And the Women's Center was kind of like that too: it wasn't homes, but I'm sure that the referrals would refer with everything. A place to live, a place to get help for your children. It was just a place to help women.

JW: Mmm-hmm.

SW: Now Mary Lou Horner could probably tell you more about that than me because I think she was there in the early years. She was on the board when I was there, too.

JW: Mmm-hmm, okay. So what was your sense of the women's movement? Did you see yourself as a part of that?

SW: I don't know if it's because I'm the oldest, or if it's because my husband always wanted me to make my own mind up and do what I want to do, that I understood the women's movement. And of course with my mother divorced and having to work, I mean, how can you not understand that women ought to have equal rights? They should be able to have a good job. They should be paid the same as a man that's doing the same

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job. I think that I always thought women had the right to do that. I worked with Wanda Sobieski on the statues that's on the market square mall; I helped raise money to get that finished, and I marched with one of my granddaughters in the parade on the day that we did the parade because I wanted her to see these issues. And to see all these women and how important it was. I just--the right to vote? I mean, what was wrong with that? And I learned that also in PTA, the three founders of the PTA were rich women, but they wanted women's rights. They wanted women to have a say; they wanted women to be able to vote. All of that was a part, that was the same group of women that made it easy for me to be able to do whatever I wanted to do. I think it was important.

I think for a few years we've kind of let down; I know there's people out there that's still working on it, but women still don't have equal rights. They still don't have their right to some jobs. Now our personalities are different, the way we approach things are different. But it takes all kinds of people to get things to the end, to success. It takes people with different personalities; people that work differently. You just have to set a goal and let everybody get to that goal. I do see women are still discriminated against; women are still not able to do what they want to do.

I feel like a lucky one, because I can pretty much say and do whatever I want do to, like I told you before. My husband has my back. I don't have to worry about any of that. Even before that, and I've always said this to my mother, is: I know that I would never go without a place to lay my head down. Because my mother would see, as long as she had a place, she would see that I was not homeless. And that's a good feeling. Because I've known people who don't know what's coming next. I've always known that, even if I was divorced, I would have a place to go. Now my mother would say,

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“Okay, you’ve got a month, now get yourself back up and out there and get a job and work.” She would put that starch back in you. But I would never go hungry, and I will never have a place to not sleep. That gives you a good feeling. And I think lots of women don’t have that. I’ve served on the advisory committee for the--. It’s not the runaway shelter, but the Child and Family Services, where the domestic violence--.

JW: Oh, the Family Crisis Center?

SW: The Family Crisis Center, yes. And those women, rich or poor, money or no money, they have to have a place to go. I could always go to my mother’s, and I know that. And my daddy went to church every time the door was open. He had his small business, and like I told you, we had whatever we wanted. But he would lose his temper and hit my mother. And fight her. That was the reason for the divorce. Here we were, he knocked her down and stomped her on her ear, and all of us children jumped in on his back and--. Of course, he slung us off and that kind of thing. My mother then had to leave him, because she said, “He’s going to kill one of you all. And I can’t have that.” I agreed with that. And people say, “Oh, I didn’t want my parents to get divorced.” Well, sometimes it’s necessary. And it was necessary—my mother didn’t want to leave my daddy, and she didn’t want to have to go to work and leave us kids. But she didn’t want us killed, either. She didn’t want us harmed.

So that was one of the goals when I met my husband; I said there’s two or three things: I’ll never allow you to hit me; I’ll leave you in a minute. No matter how much I love you or how much is money, or what it would cost me. I will not put up with that. I won’t put up with you coming in drinking and drunk. I will not handle that. I will not let you run around on me. I may not leave you, but you’ll know it; you’ll suffer over it. Or I

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may leave you; you don't ever know. But I will never put up with that, and I won't put up with you wasting your money, and not taking care of the family, paying the bills. And those were the four things, and here I was a teenager. Fourteen, fifteen years old, those were my goals. And those things I've stuck to.

I see young girls now getting theirself involved with people, who they've not set any goals for what they want for their life. And you get tied up with somebody that you love, and you can love 'em, but people don't change a whole lot. I mean they grow, they grow. But you're not going to make somebody be the person you want them to be, if they're not already there, and those standards are not already there.

So I tell young girls that, I said, "Set your goals, what you want in life. You want a house, you want a family?" You know, you want to be married, whatever. Set your goals and what are the criteria for the people you're looking for to live your life with. And you've got to start out that way. Because it don't come later.

JW: Was it difficult for your mother to get a divorce?

SW: Yes. She and my father separated when she was still pregnant with my baby sister. And then she went back after Sheila was born--. I mean here she couldn't work, she couldn't do anything until Sheila was born, and she almost had a nervous breakdown. And so she had to let Daddy come back; he was ready to come back. But come back to take care of us kids. And all of her skin peeled off. We don't know what it was, but it had to do with her nerves. I know that's what it was. Even her fingernails would come off, and the skin on her feet, and her arms, and hands, and face and everything. Her skin would peel and peel and peel. And our family doctor, doctored her for her nerves. Because the skin doctor couldn't make headway. And one time, she had to go to the

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hospital. My daddy called the ambulance to take her to the hospital. We all screamed and cried, and was afraid she'd never come back home, and what was he doing to her, he was sending her off. I can remember that. But she had to go; she'd have died if she hadn't went. But when you're a kid you don't know that.

Then she made up her mind; that's how strong a woman my mother is. She made up her mind that she was going to have to leave Daddy; she couldn't put up with the hitting. She'd save a little bit out of the grocery money every week. He would give her twenty dollars to go to the grocery store, and she would save five dollars of it. Or if he gave her money to go buy us a coat or school clothes or whatever, then she would save a little bit. When a woman has no money of her own, it's real hard. Because you're now beholden to that person. Even if you love them and they love you.

I can remember a time when, before I was working. I worked before my boys were born, then I was off for a while, and then I went back part-time. I've never worked full-time since they started school. I worked full-time there and then they went to daycare. But I wanted to be able to go to school with them, do the PTA stuff, do the Boy Scout stuff. I've always said, when they got in school, then I would work part-time; I would never work full-time because I wanted to be able to go and do what, do with them.

I was going to tell you something else there a minute ago, I got off on a--. So I told my husband, I said "Now look. You work and you draw a paycheck. And on Thursday, they come and hand you that paycheck." Or money, or whatever it is. I said, "So here's the deal. On Friday, you hand me twenty dollars. You don't ask me what it's for, how to spend it. That's my paycheck. I take care of the house, I take care of the kids; I want my own spending money. And I don't want to have to ask for it. You don't

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ask the boss for your paycheck, and I don't have to ask for it either." So he gave me twenty dollars a week, for years, and after a while, when I went back to work and was working, I said, "Okay, you can keep the twenty dollars now. I got my own check."

Even after I drew my check for a while, I kept getting that twenty dollars. And he did. He forgot it a time or two and I'd have to remind him. I think you have to make up your mind and be a little bit assertive about it; you don't have to be hateful about it, but that twenty dollars was two things. One, the money I could spend if I wanted to go buy something or have it in my pocket. And the other was I didn't want to have to ask for it. I had earned it. Just to make that point.

But I've got a good husband. He pays all the bills. I said I don't know how lucky I am, I can work at a job that I like to, on the hours I want to work, so long as I can get the work done. And my husband pays all the bills. I charge on the credit card. Then I can spend my money on whatever I want to. Sometimes, if I buy gifts like for my family or something special, then once or twice a year I'll give him some money and say okay, this is to help defray the cost or whatever.

JW: Mmm-hmm. So did you learn to make sure that you were getting essentially your paycheck, from your husband--.

SW: Right.

JW: Did you learn that from your mother? Or?

SW: No, I guess I just learned that from the need to have the money. I just didn't like having to ask: "I need five dollars to go get something for the kids," or whatever.

JW: Yeah.

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SW: And my husband always fills up my gas tank. He was out of town the other day, and I told him, I said, "My gas tank is getting low." He never wants it to get below a fourth of a tank. But I told him, I said, "It's getting low."

I had to go all the way out to the Ben Atchley Veterans Home, a bunch of Democrats, and we went out there and did some little things for them, and we took gifts and sang songs with them. I knew I was low in gas, and it came on low, and so I thought, "Well, I'll stop and get gas." I've had this car for a year. I did not know how to put gas in it. I didn't know how to get the little door open. So I called my husband, who didn't answer his cell phone, so I called my son, who was with him. And I said "How do I open the little door to get the gas thing?" and he said "You just punch it, and it pops out." Because other cars I'd had, you had to pull a lever or something to open the door. So I had to laugh at myself; I thought, at my age, a good thing: I didn't know how to put the gas in, but now I got the little book out and I knew who to call to figure it out. And I stuck that credit card in there and put the gas in it; that was no problem. But to think that I didn't have to put gas in. You know, my husband puts gas in for me. And that's a good thing to have. That's a good thing to have.

Lots of good things he does for me. He goes to the grocery store. He works--. I met him at a grocery store, at the White Store on Sevier Avenue. So he's used to grocery stores; he likes grocery stores. His brother still works, should be retiring, but he likes working at the Food City. And I just make a list and he goes and gets my groceries. I like that. Now my mama likes to go do her own grocery shopping. And I go occasionally, if I want to get meats and things like that, but he does that. I don't feel that

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I'm not a woman because I don't go to the grocery store. Hey: I'm lucky enough to have a man to go pay for it, carry it in, and put it in the cabinet. That's a good thing.

JW: Mmm-hmm. Were you involved in consciousness raising groups, or women's groups that met around town in Knoxville?

SW: Not particularly. Of course, my conscious-raising came through PTA. Good school lunches, nutrition lunches. It was after the polio shots; that was when I was a kid. But we were also looking at television, things that were safety, for kids. I remember when I was PTA council, I had a lady who was involved in nutrition. So I made her the chairman of the nutrition committee. She would bring foods to the meetings. Now I told you, I was a real picky eater when I was young, and I wouldn't let anything touch anything, and if I didn't know what it was I wouldn't eat it. I mean I wouldn't taste anything new. And she would bring crackers, wheat crackers, rye crackers, all kinds of different crackers, and have us taste them. Some of these I had never tasted. So I now know I don't like rye. I don't like rye bread, I don't like rye crackers. I always said I didn't like it, but I'd never tasted. Now I have; I do know. I like wheat. And I always ate oatmeal, so I like oats. But I would never eat broccoli. I started eating broccoli and I love broccoli. We didn't have broccoli at my house so I--no, I wouldn't touch that broccoli. I wouldn't do that.

So I, as a grown adult, and the chairman of the PTA council for all the city schools, I'm still in my learning mode. Of things to eat. And it's so funny because my sixteen-year-old grandson will try everything. He likes to try new foods, and he's, he eats really nutritiously. He's actually lost weight. He's just graduated as a sophomore. And he started taking tennis, and he started eating the right kinds of foods, and he's

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slimmed down. But he eats good, and he eats different kinds of foods. I'm real proud of him for that.

JW: So what was your relationship with women, other women--I'm assuming it was mostly women--at the PTA?

SW: The PTA was mostly women; there was men, of course. I remember Jim Lewis and Nancy Lewis. Jim was always involved with the PTA. And of course Harold would come and support me in whatever I needed him to do. Let's see. And of course at church. I was always in the women's groups there, with the Women's Missionary Union, and Sunday School, and those kinds of meetings. But just particular women's issues, I can't remember anything that stands out in my mind right now. I am a volunteer for the IRS, for eight years. I do the free income taxes down at the Blue Cross building. And now the United Way is a part of that. So I talk to women a lot about that. Especially my seniors, about how important it is to file your taxes, and we've got this benefit coming up, or that benefit, and that kind of issues.

JW: Someone had mentioned a women's group that developed out of a book club, or they chose a book and it was on particular women's issues, but you weren't on anything. Or Equal Rights Amendment--.

SW: No, no, I know that Amy Broyles, our county commissioner, she has a book club and she meets down at the Time Warp Tea Room down on Central. And they have a book club. But I've never really gotten involved in that. Because like I said, I do what I want to do but I have plenty of involvement here, with the things that we do.

JW: So how did you get more involved with the Labor Council?

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SW: Well, like I said, Harold was the president. And there was a big controversy at the state AFL-CIO, an election down there, that divided the people in this council. Some people were for one person, some for the other. Harold was the president of the council, just a new president at the time. The women that had been involved with the Amalgamated Clothing Workers, and it went into ACTWU [Amalgamated Clothing and Textile Workers Union], and some of those women were not on the same side as the Steelworkers, and Harold was a Steelworker. So they said because Harold voted, and they lost their person at the state, they said "Here at the Labor Council, then, we're not going to help you. We're going to get out of the Labor Council." Because it was a volunteer thing. So they did. Over half his board left the Labor Council. So he had no secretary, no treasurer, and only a small board. So he went out and recruited the local that I'm a member now, the Office and Professional Employees International Union, he recruited their president to come in. And she became secretary, and another one of their members became the treasurer. But the treasurer of this organization takes a lot more time, and this woman was working and not a part of the movement, and so it was something that she had to give up.

Now the secretary, that was the president of 144, she went on to be the labor liaison at United Way for labor here, and then the director of United Way in Blount County. She went on to do that, but she got her feet wet here at this Labor Council. But because I had worked in an office, and because I knew how to do things, I would help him with all of this stuff. And he wanted things to happen.

So we started a newsletter. I'm still doing that newsletter every month, all these years later. We're still doing the newsletter. Talks about the different activities that's

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coming up, and what we're doing, and all that kind of stuff. They were sending out a meeting notice on a little card they just wrote the date in, said a meeting. Well, I said, "Harold, that don't tell you anything. It just tells you the meeting." So it'd be just as cheap for us to do nonprofit permit mailing, because I was already doing that. I learned that for the PTA; I did that for my PTA. So we started doing that newsletter.

I guess I was a volunteer for maybe a year before--. They were paying the president an amount, secretary an amount, the treasurer amount. Somebody else. And we put all those amounts together, put a little more money with it, and none of the officers drew any money then, and then they hired me. And then we had a janitor we were already paying. So you had payroll, that you were already doing, and filing the annual reports and the Social Security reports and all this stuff. I didn't know how to do any of that stuff. But I looked back to see what was done, and since there was only him and me, it was easier to do. I went to school and learned something, went to classes and learned how to do that. So the very first year I came to work here, the 990 that nonprofits file--. We, although we are the AFL-CIO, the umbrella over the different unions belong, as a part of a coalition kind of, in the federation, we essentially are not a union ourselves. See, we don't have contracts with the workforce out there. So we didn't have to file the LM-2's or the LM-3's. We only had to file that 990. The first year I went to work here, they looked back on the old one, and the people that had been doing it before that, even before their union pulled them out, they still had two or three of the people helped Harold. And showed him what needed to be done, and how to keep the books, and that kind of thing.

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So I would go with him and we would do that. And that was not his thing; remember, he was working full-time at ALCOA at the same time. So while he can be the leadership, he didn't deal with the paperwork, that kind of thing. I helped him with that. Until they hired me, to work part-time here, and we've done a lot since we've been here.

The year that PATCO [Professional Air Traffic Controllers Organization] went out at the air strike over there, when Reagan was president, we went over there and rallied with them. And before Reagan was elected president, we had some visitors. Remember that World's Fair came in [19]82? The Labor Department, now the U.S. Government, brings visitors from other countries in, they all wanted to come here because they wanted to see where the World's Fair was going to be. Even though it was a big hole in the ground, they were still working on it and building it. We had several groups of foreigners that came here. They would ask us if we would help.

We would help them tour around and whatever, and so we did that. We took a group of their air control people over to the airport and met with them, and they would say, "Well, why are you all supporting Ronald Reagan, when the rest of the labor movement's not really supporting Ronald Reagan?" And they said, "Oh, well, because of this letter, he said our conditions were so bad he was going to correct all that stuff." And he did! We had copies of the letters that he had done. Well, after he got to be president, they went on strike, because they thought, "He's going to help us because he said he was." And then he fired them all. So. Anyway, that was a big controversy that we worked in. Then the Baptist hospital had technicians and they couldn't get a contract, and we'd go over there and picket over there a lot. The phone company, we would go down there. We did White Lily, with the UPS went on strike one time, we did that.

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And then years ago, the Mine Workers at, I want to call it Pinkston, but Pittston. Pittston. When they went on strike up there, there was a lot of people here that went up. I didn't actually go up to the mines to picket, but it got us more involved with the Mine Workers. We had a group of mine workers that were trying to organize in Campbell County. And they shut the plant down. Because these people had the vote, but they just closed the plant. Said "We just closed the mines." So for two different years, we made Christmas for those mine workers. All the unions bought presents, they adopted a family, took names, bought stuff for the kids. We bought those trashcans on wheels, those big trashcans, and we filled them up with presents and boxes of stuff. The Teamsters provided work with their trucking companies and we got those great big trucks, sixteen-eighteen-wheelers, and we had a truck full and then we would go up to Campbell County and give them the presents, and we would take them some money to buy milk and butter and things, dairy stuff.

Two different years, and during that time, was when we met Richard Trumka, who was working with the mine workers and is president of the AFL-CIO now. We have a long history with him, and of course he knows us. And that's the other part of it: if you're going to be active, you've got to step out there and meet people that can do things for you. At that time he couldn't do anything for us; we were doing for him. But he'd never forgot that, and has always done things. We would call him over at UT, when they organized the campus workers over there, we called Richard Trumka and said, "We're doing the organizing. The students have started this organizing for the employees, the low-end employees over there. And will you come and help us with the teach-in?" and

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he did. He came. He came one time and installed our officers. But you have to ask, or you don't get. And you've got to be there.

Many times, Harold and I would go to meetings that we really didn't want to go to. We'd much rather have went home. But because we represented the labor movement, because we represented the labor council, they expect you to be there. And we would laugh and say well, it's not whether we see them, it's whether they see us. Because if they know they can depend on you showing up at their rally, or showing up at their meeting, or showing up at their reception, they can count on you, then when you need them you can count on them. You've got to be out there. You can't just sit in your computer and send emails all day. That's fine, but if you don't meet people face to face, shake hands with them, let them know that you care about their issues, as well as your issues, and educate them.

Lots of people would know nothing about the labor movement if we weren't in the mix of talking about it at church. If they're not in a union, or not working where the union is, they still have that feeling: unions are bad, unions are corrupt, unions are gangsters. Unions knock you out of a job. All kinds of stuff. Well, who's going to tell me different, except somebody that has witnessed it and been there? So we're all the time bringing another point of view to people.

Even the prayer in schools issue: "Oh, they took the prayer out of schools!" and I say "How can they take prayer out of schools? What's a prayer? It's a conversation between you and God. How can they stop that?" If you pray with your children at home, when they get up, over their breakfast, or on their way to school, then why do you need a

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teacher, who might not be your religion, teaching your child how to pray? If you've taught your child prayer, you don't need the school to teach them to pray.

[sighs] "Oh Sylvia, you're starting off on that." You know. But you get these—you get people who really don't think for themselves, they listen this rhetoric. Well, I've learned not to have to listen to the rhetoric. I learned that there's other ways to do things. And I go back to my husband, made it possible for me to be a part of this movement, he made it possible for me to be in the PTA, he made it possible for me to be in the Scouts, he made it possible for me to work here, and he backs me wherever I go.

We, the Jobs with Justice organization, we got it started here at the Labor Council. Now it's like a standalone committee at this point, but still support those efforts. We worked on the living wage campaign. I mean why shouldn't people who go to work have a living wage? It's just saying a living wage is to be able to have a place to live, a way to get back and forth to work, and to be able to have a few things for your children. We're not saying a rich wage, we're saying a living wage! And people fight people having a living wage. It's just unbelievable. They fight people having a minimum wage. A minimum wage is only a bottom wage. Where was it, the other day I heard somebody saying something about, I don't know if it was [United States Senator Bob] Corker, or [United States Senator Lamar] Alexander. Oh, I know who it was. It was that Paul. That one in Kentucky. Ron Paul's son.

JW: Yeah, Rand.

SW: Yeah, Rand was saying "You shouldn't have to tell companies, make them pay something they can't afford to pay." And I'm thinking, so you want them, you want people to work for them, and then they decide how much money the company wants to

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make. I mean it's their company, we want all companies to be in business! We want them to make a profit; otherwise, there wouldn't be any jobs for people. But if you leave it up to them to decide how much they're going to pay you, they're going to pay you the least amount they can pay you. And expect you to be happy about it. That's not how it should be. If you can't make enough money to pay your employees a decent salary, then maybe you shouldn't be in business. Maybe you should go to work for somebody else.

Every small business doesn't make it. I hear [Bill] Haslam talk about "all these small businesses, all these small businesses." Really? Tell me a small business that don't want to be a big business. There must be something to it! They don't want to stay small forever. They want to grow; they want to get big. So what is it that it's so good about being a small business? It's just a way to get started but they all want to grow up.

JW: Mmm-hmm. Well how did you first get involved in politics, because I see you've been--.

SW: Well, my PTA. Mary Lou said "Go to the school board meetings, go to the city council meetings; go to the county commissions, meetings. Learn who these people are, listen to 'em, have your opinions." And you would go and listen to the people, and you would think: they can't make a decision! What's wrong with these people? I can make a decision better than that! You just want to take them and shake them and say listen! You say this, and you say this, and listen to each other, and let's get this resolved. Don't be spinning so many wheels about it; it can happen if you'll let it happen. So when I came to work here, it naturally threw me into the politics. But all my background came from the PTA. I knew the people, I knew who to talk to, I knew when the meetings were.

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I knew the kind of issues that they worked with, so here we recommend people for endorsement. We work for candidates, here at the labor movement.

Well, that naturally then put me into the Democrat politics. Because my daddy was Republican; my mother didn't vote--course she does now, because I see that she does--but Harold and I grew up in Republican families, and we thought that's terrific. I remember that Hubert Humphrey was blamed for taking the prayer out of schools. We just thought he was awful, he was terrible. Course I've learned a lot more about it and that's not the case, but that was what was being said.

So when Harold went to ALCOA--and I guess Harold went to ALCOA in '65. In November of '65. He began to learn who voted for who. Who gave us public education, who supported public education. Who supported Social Security. Course there wasn't Medicare then. But who supported labor issues. And the more meetings he would go to, and the more he would learn about it, he realized. It's not the Republicans that support the working people. It's the Democrats that support the working people. So he got more and more involved with that. Even before he came over here. Then by the time he came over here, we were both voting all the time and helping--. I used to make a little sample ballot up for Harold's daddy, and he would call me and he'd say, "Sylvia, where's my ballot? Where's my ballot?" And I'd mark his little ballot and he'd take it in with him and vote. I still do that for a lot of people. But Sherman really looked for his ballot every--. He wanted to go vote! And he was Republican too, until we explained the situation and who to vote for. So we've got a whole bunch of family members who didn't vote. Who either didn't vote or didn't vote Democrat. Republican to Democrat.

JW: But you feel like you've turned some of them--.

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SW: Oh yeah. And like I said: we turned!

JW: Right.

SW: We turned. And people say, "I've been a lifelong Democrat, oh my daddy'd turn over in his grave if I wasn't a Democrat, blah blah blah." I think, I'm proud of you for being a Democrat. But let me tell you: a person who learns why they become a Democrat who become Democrat, or even people who vote Republican and have a reason for doing it. It's much more impressive to me than somebody who says "I was born a Democrat." Well, you were born in your family of Democrats. But we made a conscious decision who was doing the best for us. And chose to be Democrats. So I think people that choose to be.

And we've got a lot of people now that got involved with the Obama campaign, that never was Republican or Democrat. And didn't take an interest. But Obama stirred a group of people to be active, and they're still active. He kept his organization together, Organizing for America. It was Organizing for Obama, let's see, I forget. Anyway, the OFA. Obama for America. Now it's Organizing for America. And those people still stay together to help lobby for his issues. And that's good. You shouldn't just support a candidate; you should support a candidate who supports your issues, and understands your issues. And our labor council has endorsed Republicans.

Now I serve on the state board, and Harold does too, on the state executive committee for the Democrats. Well, if you serve in a Democrat position, then you should always vote. In a Democrat primary. You should not vote in a Republican primary, and we don't. Now, this last election here in Knox County, lots of Democrats went over and voted in the Republican primary because of the race between the county mayor. I don't

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fault people for that. But if you are an elected Democrat office-holder, and I don't mean like Nichols as an attorney general as a Democrat, I mean like in the party. If you're a party office-holder, then you should be out supporting the Democrats. And you shouldn't be bothering the Republicans. You should get somebody to run. If you don't have anybody in your primary to run against them, shame on you. You should have somebody running.

JW: Mmm-hmm. So since you've been involved in politics—

SW: I love it.

JW: How have you seen things change? Since you first began?

SW: Well, Republicans have taken over more than they were at one time. I think many more officeholders in the county were Democrat. Before I got involved in the actual county party politics, there were years that all officeholders downtown were Democrat. And now they're about all Republican. Downtown. But what I see the difference is, is the PR [public relations]. What they talk about. And I'll give you a labor movement example: Right to Work.

People used to, Republicans, support the Right to Work law. People say "Well of course you should have the right to work. Why shouldn't they have the right to work? They should have the right to work anywhere they want to." But if they really understood what the law meant, that if you work somewhere, that means they can hire you or fire you--the employer has the complete control of hiring and firing you. You have no say in it. You have no rights. The only right you have is to quit. And sometimes if they train you, they can charge you for that. 'Cause they've trained you. They won't let you go to

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someplace else that works with, like they trained you. So we don't like Right to Work laws, and that's a Republican name for it.

JW: It basically confuses people.

SW: It basically confuses people, as to what it stands for. And they're talking about this Obamacare as the health care. The people that don't want it are people that already have insurance paid for by somebody else. Because there's plenty of people out here who don't have healthcare. Healthcare is a big, something they've fought for since Truman, Roosevelt--even the first Roosevelt fought for healthcare for people. And it's just like they don't understand it.

I mean why shouldn't people have healthcare? That should be a basic right. Something I believe in. And fought hard for, wrote letters for, marched for, all that kind of thing. At the same time, my husband worked at ALCOA, and we've had healthcare. Harold went to work in November of '65, and my son Harold was born in December of '65. He had been there a month. I had worked before that so I had hospitalization from where I worked, and also-- Well no, I wasn't covered at ALCOA yet, because Harold hadn't been there long enough. But he had been there long enough that little Harold was covered. So they paid his nursery bill at the hospital where he was born, because he was a son of an employee. And then my healthcare paid for where I worked. But we laughed about that. Now, what company would've done that if it hadn't had a union contract? You wouldn't have had that healthcare. I never worked for ALCOA, and I'm covered under ALCOA's health insurance. As a retiree, you don't have the same benefits as the people that are working there, but you definitely have--we're also on Medicare, so we have that benefit. But it's just not fair for people not to have.

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And I went to the doctor the other--well, I called Humana, which is my carrier, and I said "I think I've got a spider bite on my arm. My arm is swelling up. I need to go to the clinic because the doctor's office is already closed." They told me I could go to Clinton Highway or I could go to St. Mary's to their clinic. It was at the emergency room place, but it was a clinic. So I thought, I don't want to go to the emergency room because it's not an emergency, but I will go to the clinic. I tried going to Walgreens. they wouldn't cover the insurance. So I went out there. Now I'm not happy with the healthcare I got. They decided they wanted to x-ray it; they did all kinds of stuff, and I told them after I'd been there for two hours: I said, "I'm going to give you thirty more minutes and then I'm out of here." I said "I came to--" They said "Well, you came because you wanted the best healthcare." I said "I came here to get a prescription, because I was told I had to have a prescription because of the infection, that it had to be a prescription. Across-the-counter stuff wouldn't do." But I said "I'm not waiting all day. I've got things to do, I've got people waiting on me." So I waited another thirty minutes, they still weren't through with me, still didn't get my prescriptions. So I told them, I said "Look, I'm gone. You have my phone number, you've got my name, you've got my information. Call me." So I left. Well now it's going to cost me fifty-three dollars to go there. Which normally it costs me fifteen dollars if I went to the doctor. But it wasn't a clinic, and I'm having some issue with Humana. I was telling him, I'm going to call Humana and say "You shouldn't have told me it was a clinic if it wasn't a clinic."

But I showed my preacher this morning, because I volunteer at church on Wednesday mornings, and I showed him my bill, and I said, "I want you to look at this. What they did for me was \$1,221.45. The insurance paid \$141.90, and I owe fifty-three

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dollars. They charged me three dollars and twenty cents because they gave me a pill and that was self-administered and I took it, and it wasn't covered and I have to pay for that. So that's a hundred and ninety dollars that this twelve-hundred bill is going to, and clear the bill. If I had no insurance at all, my bill would've been 1,221. If I had no insurance, I would not have gotten this break on here, and obviously I couldn't afford insurance if I didn't have any. How could I have afforded this bill? There's something wrong with that. And then to say, "Oh, people don't need to, oh, we don't need national health care"? Every big country in this world has national health care. I would've liked for it to have been the single.

JW: Single payer.

SW: Single payer. Because then the paperwork would've been less, and frankly, I would've liked if they couldn't have done that. Or they could've done it in conjunction with Medicare. See, I think that they could've said, ok: Medicare: you know what benefits you've got, you know you have to have your supplement and that kind of thing. We're going to say, instead of you getting Medicare at 65, we're going to jump it down to 55. So anybody that's 55 to 65 is going to get Medicare. With insurance. And then in another five years, we're going to go down to 50 or 45, until they get to meet in the middle. Of course you have to do that on the children. And somewhere meet in the middle. Then you have single payer, and then there would be no confusion about what benefits you have, because everybody would have had the same benefit. And the same paperwork. And a whole lot less profit for those people who are out there ripping us off.

JW: Mmm-hmm. Well can I ask you--.

SW: Sure.

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JW: Another question about local, what you've seen with politics. And I'm curious about, since you were organizing for the local Obama campaign, and you were involved with politics during that historic election, what was your sense of the racial dynamics in this area, that went very--.

SW: Okay. I was a Hillary supporter. And I was actually a Hillary delegate to the national convention. But it was obvious before August, before the convention, that Obama was going to be our nominee. Our current party chair was the Obama organizer, and she'd never been involved in politics before. But she's a teacher at Central High School; she's terrific. And she was running the Obama office and doing a lot of bringing a lot of people in. I was the party chair at that time. The previous party chair had resigned, and I ran for re-election and was elected to be party chair, so from that time until the convention in April I was party chair, but I was party chair during that time.

Well I knew two things. One is my own mind: I had to get off of this woman being the first president idea. Two: Obama's going to be our nominee, and we've got to have him elected. So I didn't have any problem with it, because I had to work with everybody. We had people who were still adamant against Obama. And then we had people who were [pro-] Obama, who didn't want to consider themselves Democrats. Obama, that's who they were for, but they didn't know if they wanted to be a Democrat. Or maybe they were Republican or leaning toward being a Republican, but they still liked Obama.

So it was a funny dynamic, the different people that you worked with and talked to. But Gloria was great, and I was able to work with her. And then I would bring people with me. I don't mean hold their hand and bring them. But the fact that I was a

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Hillary delegate, and I was working with the Obama campaign, it was like, well it must be okay to do that. So you have to use your leadership skills, and you have to act like it's not anything different than needs to be done.

JW: So that's inside your party. What is it like being Democrat--.

SW: But most of the people that worked in the Obama campaign were white. Rich, poor, there were some minorities. Course, in Knox County, it's not a very high percentage of African Americans. But young people, old people, well educated, not well educated, are all working. And we have the tools within the Democrat party now to do what we call vote builder, to make telephone calls; we have lists that's available to us much easier than before. So we're gearing up for this year; we're gearing up for the November elections in particular. We've got several new people running at the state level, that's in this area. And we're gearing up for their campaigns. Door knocking, phone calling, helping raise money. All that kind of stuff.

Because this is the year of the state reorganizing everything. I forgot what we call it. The year after the census, every ten years, they redistrict. If the house and the senate and the governor is all Republican, then they get to draw the lines of where the districts are. How that works is they'll draw the lines to make every district more favorable to the Republicans. They may run, like, Joe Armstrong and Harry Tindell. Both are Democrat representatives here. They may merge their district into one big district. Now, it has to be by numbers, and the people that live in those districts, but still the lines can go down the middle of the street, and through the houses and all that. They could put them in the same district. They would have to run against each other. And yet, their districts might

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be more favorable to a Democrat. And now what's left over in these other districts, a Democrat couldn't win.

So you have to have some compromise to get it done, and as you see, the Republicans don't compromise on anything. They hold their feet to the fire and don't even let the people who want to compromise compromise. So we have to win back the house for sure. We don't know about the Senate, but the House is going to be easier for us to do. So we've got a number of new people running. Stacey Campfield left his district and we've got a Democrat running there. We've got a Democrat running against [Frank] Nicely in the Jefferson-South Knoxville district. That's a Republican officeholder running there. We've got one up in Campbell County. My labor council covers fifteen counties, so we've got a Democrat up in Campbell County that's running. We've got a Democrat leaving office in Morristown, in Hamblen County. We've got another Democrat running in his seat. So you have to cover those seats where you have Democrats, and you have to break into some new places. So that even if we don't have the Senate, then we have the House, then there'll be some areas.

That's why Lincoln Davis' district, the District Four, in the U.S. House, goes from like Campbell County all the way down almost to Memphis. It's a terrible district. You couldn't hardly even drive it in a day, because it's not on the interstate, it's back in the back roads and all that kind of stuff. Well, because somebody drew the lines that way. For those reasons. So everything happens with your politics, what happens to you. Healthcare happens, labor rights happen. Obama appointed two people to the National Labor Relations Board, but there's supposed to be five people on it; they've only had two people for a long time. Which, two people out of five is not even a majority, so anything

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that we had, any organizing campaign, any organizing drives or any questions that goes to the National Labor Relations Board, couldn't be answered. For several years now. And so they wouldn't agree with Obama's choices, so he just had to make appointments during the recess. Which Bush did all the time. It's awful, now that Obama's doing it, but Bush did it all the time. So it's, like I said, the whole story's not out there.

JW: Well. Is there anything else you would like to add, at the end of this interview? Any topic that you would like to bring up?

SW: Let me think here. This comes to mind; this is so crazy. But when you write a letter, or when you make a note, or you make a list, and you put a date on it, put the year on it. Because you won't remember that. I catch myself making notes and then I think I know that, and two years later when you look at it you wonder, ooh, what year was that? Did that happen? So I guess just little things like that.

Set your goals. And stick to it. Be happy in life. Do what you want to do. Because nobody knows what you want, except you. And if you can't be happy with yourself, you're not going to be happy with anybody else. So do that. Always do things for kids, and always love your mother. My mother taught us that the Bible says "honor your mother and father, and your days will be long." And she lived by that, and so we all do that too. Get you some roots somewhere; it's nice to travel but it's good to have roots, a place to come back to.

The labor movement has done a lot of, a lot for my husband and I. We got to travel because he's had to represent people and they would pay our way, to go to this convention or to go to that convention. So we've traveled a lot in the United States. We've been to Japan twice, course we paid for that ourselves. We've been to Greece,

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and we paid for that. With the Sister City program, what our city has is a good way to get to go and have somebody there that can speak your language and look for you when you get there. See what you can see!

JW: Well, thank you. I appreciate your time.

SW: I appreciate you wanting to interview me, and I'll probably think of a thousand things I want to tell you after you leave.

JW: Well I can always come back. [Laughter]

SW: Right. I guess the other thing is to always take care of your money. There's two things. My husband and I will be married for forty-nine years this year. And the two things we say that tears people up is how they spend their money, and if they run around on each other. Those are two things that's never been a problem with us. Because we spend on what we want to spend on. We're never cheap with each other and what we want to spend on. But we never overdo. We always pay our credit cards off when the bill comes. And we taught our children that: that financial stability can give you that confidence that you need. Many times when we were young, we had no money. And my husband tells now, he'll say "We went to the Krystal, and we could get a hamburger and fries, but only one hamburger and one fry. And we would share it." We didn't overspend what we didn't have. And when credit cards came out, we said, "If we can't pay for it when the bill comes, then we don't buy it. We save as much money this month as we can, and then the next month we might can save a little bit more, and then when the bill comes thirty days later, we can pay for it." And we would figure that out. Otherwise, we did without. We taught our boys the same way, we said, "We'll help you get credit cards, but here's the deal. Never pay any interest. Because you start paying that interest and

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pretty soon, that bargain you thought you had cost you more than if you just bought it outright.” So. People need to watch their money. And they would never get into that position that they can’t take care of themselves.

JW: Well. Thank you.

SW: You are young, and so I mean I want to ask you questions, so you—you’re going to school, are you—

END OF INTERVIEW.

Transcribed by Winnie Titchener, October 2010.

Edited by Jessica Wilkerson, 6 December 2010.