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

Interview U-0545
Maureen O'Connell
12 August 2010

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ABSTRACT – MAUREEN O’CONNELL

Maureen O’Connell grew up in St. Louis, Ill., in the 1940s. She was a community organizer for Save Our Cumberland Mountains from 1974-1992, and she served as Executive Director of the organization from 1992-2009. She begins the interview by talking about her childhood in East St. Louis, Ill.; her father's involvement in the labor movement; her Irish heritage; growing up in an Irish Catholic family; and family life with ten siblings. She discusses becoming a teacher in Louisville, Ky. in 1967; joining the Louisville Peace Society; learning about the civil rights movement in Louisville, Ky. and supporting the West End Community Council; the Black Power movement; and becoming aware of the Black Six case in Louisville. She talks about volunteering in her community; learning about “The Movement”; connecting with the women's movement; the influence of civil rights organizing on her life; and reading Michael Harrington's *Poverty in America*. She explains how she ended up in Clairfield, Tenn in 1969; volunteering for Save Our Cumberland Mountains (SOCM); conducting research for the Vanderbilt Student Health Coalition; her family's reaction to her political activities; her friendship with Anne Braden and participation in the Southern Conference Educational Fund. She describes how Save Our Cumberland Mountains has changed over the years; building coalitions between African American and rural white communities, especially JONAH (Just Organized Neighborhoods Area Headquarters); participating in the Southern Empowerment Project; and anti-racist organizing. She describes women's leadership in Save Our Cumberland Mountains and gender roles in social movement organizations. She describes threats and intimidation that members of SOCM faced; tensions in communities between strip miners and those who opposed strip mining; and the Wartburg Massacre. She discusses legislation that regulates strip mining; SOCM’s relationship to the environmental movement; the resonance of environmental justice in low-income, working-class communities; and SOCM’s position on labor and economic justice issues. This interview is part of the Southern Oral History Program's project to document the women's movement in the American South.

FIELD NOTES – MAUREEN O’CONNELL

Interviewee: Maureen O’Connell

Interviewer: Jessie Wilkerson

Interview Date: August 12, 2010

Location: Appalachian Community Fund offices, Knoxville, TN

THE INTERVIEWEE. Maureen O’Connell was born in St. Louis, Illinois, where she grew up in the 1940s and 1950s. She was a community organizer for Save Our Cumberland Mountains from 1974-1992, and she served as Executive Director of the organization from 1992-2009.

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. Maureen O’Connell had a two-hour window to meet with me in Knoxville. We met in Gaye Evans’ office at the Appalachian Community Fund. Maureen brought along notes for herself, and she brought a wonderful list of names—including bios and contact information—for women she has known over the years in Save Our Cumberland Mountains. I stopped the recording twice during the interview, once to adjust the settings and another time to reload the machine.

NOTE ON RECORDING. I used a Zoom recorder.

TRANSCRIPT – MAUREEN O’CONNELL

Interviewee: Maureen O’Connell

Interviewer: Jessica Wilkerson

Interview date: August 11, 2010

Location: Knoxville, Tennessee

Length: 1 disc, approximately 90 minutes

Jessica Wilkerson: This is Jessie Wilkerson, and I am in Knoxville, Tennessee with Maureen O’Connell, and the date is August 11, 2010.

Maureen O’Connell: Hi Jessie.

JW: [Laughter] Hi. So Maureen, could we start by talking about your childhood and where you come from?

MO: Yeah, it’s a long time ago.

JW: [Laughter]

MO: [Laughter] Sure. Sure. I was actually born in east St. Louis, Illinois in July 8, 1944, which makes me sixty-six right now. And I am the second-oldest of eleven children in a second-generation Irish-American family. My grandparents came from Ireland and that’s on my father’s side, the O’Connells. And my mother was born in the South, in Louisiana, and grew up in Texas. She and my dad met during World War Two at an Army base dance. And two of us, my older sister and I, were born actually during the war. I didn’t see my father for about fourteen or fifteen months because he was over in the European Theatre in the war. But I would say my family very much shaped my early life.

My dad, especially, started being very active in the unions in the 1930s. [He] was a railway worker for a while, and a part of the Railway Brotherhood [now the Transportation Communications International Union], wrestled freight on the docks. [He] hurt his back, and then was just--. Went to work for an insurance company, on a rural debit; [the] insurance company was John Hancock. And he, with a couple of other guys, actually formed the first insurance workers' local in the country in East St. Louis, Illinois, back before he was drafted in the war in 1941. So 1942 was when he was drafted. He worked with union organizers a lot, not just in the insurance organizers' local, and in the railway local, but was very caught up in the union movement, and was on a track to being a full-time union organizer. And then he was drafted, and came back with a wife and two children, and my mother didn't like to be left alone with two children. And so he just stayed very, very, active in his own local union for all of his years, and all my growing up years.

He was probably influenced by his father [my grandfather], who had come from Ireland, and his family was very Sinn Féin, very Ireland for the Irish. Although my grandfather immigrated in the early 1900s, his whole family was very very active in Finnian movement in the 1800s and later in the revolution in Ireland to throw off the British. And so my grandfather also was a streetcar conductor, and [he was] very active in his union. [He was a] very principled man who, during the race riots in East St. Louis, back in the nineteen-teens, just as a matter of principle, defused his whole neighborhood from getting involved in the race riots. Faced down people who wanted to take black people off his bus. [He] was a very quiet, very principled, courageous man, while my father was a lot feistier than my grandfather, and more prone to sit-ins and very active kinds of tactics. I think [he] got a lot of his principles also from his father.

So I feel like I come from a line of people who were very conscious of the rights of other people, and the need to struggle. And so I feel very proud of that history.

My dad was a big influence in my life; the other, I would say, big influence in my life was that for my grandfather and my father and really for the whole family, faith was really very important. And I grew up in a very strong Irish Catholic family, and so with all the pros and cons of that, but there was a very strong element of faith and values and what's really important, and it isn't just getting ahead. The fact of the matter was we had eleven children; my father never made more than seven thousand dollars a year, so we were a struggling, low-income, working-class family, and you had to believe there was something more than just getting ahead financially or you'd feel pretty bad about yourself. [Laughter]

So the messages I got very much in my youth were, everybody puts their pants on the same way. It's a very populist thing, you never--. It's not how much money you have. You never push anybody around; you don't let anybody push you around, you don't push anybody else around. You know? Those were just base, base messages that I grew up with. And hearing my dad, who had a high school education, dictate grievances to my mom on this little punch-typewriter, you know, because he argued every grievance at his union, against company lawyers, and he knew the contracts better than they did. [He was a] very self-taught man, as was my grandfather, who had about three or four years of education in Ireland. So my mother was a teacher, but all my growing up was a stay-at-home mom. Guess why? There was eleven children. [Laughter] What else do you do?

JW: [Laughter] Basically, [she] had a little school.

MO: I think her life was pretty full; I have tremendous admiration for her because she didn't abuse us. It was a very close family. It was a very close, loving family, and it was a big

influence in my life. At any rate, there was also a real strong value of education in the family. Of the eleven children in the family, ten finished college. Working their way through college, or--. One, a business school. There was a strong value for that.

Skipping ahead, I became a teacher. That was the course of life that I chose. And ended up, through a whole set of circumstances that [are] complex to explain, I ended up teaching in a school in Louisville, Kentucky, which was not exactly an inner-city school, but it was a near-inner-city school with--in 1967, when I started teaching--about fifty percent African American, about fifty percent white, primarily working-class white. And I would say, in terms of influences on my life, that was--. I got a lot of political education from Louisville in the late sixties. I would say, in that period of time, that was the time when a lot of the movements we talk about in the sixties were taking place. I would say I was more influenced by the civil rights movement than almost any other one. I was very active in the antiwar movement, and this took a lot of turning around in my own head, to be honest with you.

I was a teacher, and I remember in college actually being shocked by people taking me to teach-ins where somebody would say the U.S. was wrong, in something like foreign policy in Vietnam. I grew up in a fairly, a very populist, progressive family, in labor, not in international relations or other areas of life. As a teacher, I remember knowing, "Well this is an incredibly important event going on right now in our time. I better learn more about it." And being on the track of what I thought was going to be my life, which I thought was going to be college teaching--at that point of my life, you know? But I said "I've just got to read more." And I checked out about fifteen books from the library, read all kinds of books about the history of the Vietnam struggle from all points of view, and still remember putting down the last book and

sobbing, "We're wrong." I just knew the U.S. policy was wrong, and so the next day I joined the Louisville Peace Society and started marching.

But so, before that I just was lucky to be living where I was, at the time I was, and exposed to what I was. Because there was an active group called the West End Community Council, in the western end of Louisville, which was a group of both African American and white people, really working for civil rights. And there was a lot of open housing; there were terrible black repression cases in Louisville at that time. So marching and singing with people. It was also at a time when the Black Power movement started, and including, in the West End Community Council, African Americans saying, "We need to organize ourselves, and many of you whites are sort of do-gooders."

I was young enough to understand it. I don't want to say young and old, but I understood what was going on, and really appreciated the need for the Black Power movement. I taught in a high school where there was an African American teacher who taught in the history department with me, who--. We went to a number of things that I was asked to leave, because I was [the only] white [person] in the room. And I understood it. It was just like it was interesting, because I--. It was one of the real dramatic changes in my life, to begin to understand the nature of racism, and the nature of what had been just the differences in experiences in America, even from a low-income white, not feeling privileged background, but to what white privilege really is.

I think one of the turning points of even my time there, that really just shocked and jolted me, was that there was a case called the Black Six in Louisville, Kentucky. And it was during a time when it was just basically an attempt to chill some of the civil rights activity going on in Louisville. There were six people charged with conspiracy to blow up the oil refinery in West

Louisville, as a disruption thing. And it turned out that one of the people who was charged with that was a woman who was the mother of a girl I was teaching, and who I knew very, very well, Ruth Bryant, who lived across from the oil refinery. It would've blown up her house. The whole thing absolutely was such a jolt to me, like "Maybe the police are not our friends. Maybe there is something like a political conspiracy going on." It just jolted a young twenty-three, twenty-four year-old, which I was at the time, into some new recognition about really how deep and institutionalized racism was.

So I would say that was just a radical influence in my early life. It was also a time when I was like the quintessential volunteer, besides teaching and having all kinds of independent studies and co-teaching classes with some of my students. Every evening [I] was going to some meeting, every morning was passing out leaflets at someplace where workers were on strike. It was a time in this country when it seemed like change was so imminent. Deep, deep change was so imminent. That all you really needed to [do was] just keep your shoulder to the wheel, and almost all of your time. It was a very exhilarating time of promise for what seemed to be some changes that were happening at that time.

JW: Can I pause just one minute?

MO: Sure.

[recording turns off and then back on]

JW: We're good. The machine, the WAV file--. Anyway. It would take too long to explain. It's good now.

MO: Okay. It's good now. Okay. Do you think we've lost what was--?

JW: No, no.

MO: Okay. That's good. So what I was going to say was it was also a time, just connected with the women's movement, that there were, especially among women I knew in Louisville, whose partners or whose husbands were very active in some aspect of, quote, "The Movement," which is what people talked about at that time. [They] were getting together and very much studying women's literature, having consciousness-raising groups, looking again at what seemed to be male domination in a lot of aspects of the movement. And I remember talking with some of them about this, and some of them were friends of mine. I think I might've gone to one or two--. Man, I had a full schedule. I was teaching all the time, and I was going to all these [Laughter]. I was like, this full-time volunteer plus teacher.

And so I never really joined one, and I think part of it was that in my own life at that point, it wasn't a tremendous need for me to raise some consciousness about my own strength or leadership, or something. I was very, very involved, and I wasn't as involved as some of them were, as a partner of somebody who, when got assigned to doing the coffee, and whatever else--. I was the head of a department at this school and [was] choosing the things that I really wanted to be involved in. But I was very much influenced by what was happening, I would say, among people, women, who--. Understanding, and doing reading, and sometimes I know I went to several meetings of the National Women's Political Caucus, another one of the things that I was involved in.

I would say probably the civil rights movement had more impact on my life at that point, and [it] took more of my time and consciousness-raising along that aspect of it. But it was the air you would breathe at that time, that there was also a real new consciousness among women about oppression. And I guess at that point, personally, I wasn't experiencing individual oppression as much, to need to have that be the biggest piece of my life. But I sure recognized.

And I sure recognized, I was almost surprised sometimes, when I'd be in groups, and men would think they had the floor all the time. Or the dynamics would be, you'd say something and it'd be somewhat discounted, and it just kind of made me mad. It would be kind of discounted and a man would say the same thing and all of a sudden it was important. You think, or some other women would say something, and you'd say "Well she just said that." I mean that's what I would say: "I believe she just said that," or "What's the deal here?" [Laughter]

So at any rate, I would say there really was, it was like the air you breathed was what's going on, and in many of those struggles for dignity, and for righting what was wrong about the structure of society and in gender and race, I understood pretty deeply about class, from my own background. So at any rate, that was another pivotal time.

Then, by another completely set of accidents, which again, the accidental things aren't so important, I ended up--. As a teacher, you also have summers free. Which, the first summer I was teaching. I went into a college economics program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. It was funded by R.J. Reynolds tobacco company or something. And I was pretty appalled by some of the tone of this capitalist-oriented economics. But still, I was thinking I was going to be a college teacher, and so I took some of these courses. Well, that was the last time I've been to school, formally. [Laughter]

JW: [Laughter]

MO: [It] was in the summer of 1968. Because by the next summer, I was doing a lot of reading about, you know, Michael Harrington's *Poverty in America*. I knew very well that in Kentucky, Louisville was the only big city. And that most of the rest of the state was rural. So some of the political awareness I was coming to led me to think, "I'll try to do something else with this summer." And [I] started looking around to volunteer opportunities somewhere out in

the country. And I'm just going to say by a total accident, I ended up meeting a woman who did community development in Tennessee, who was visiting a common friend. I'm just telling you, it was totally accidental that I met her, and so among the ten letters I wrote away to the settlement houses and this and that place for volunteering, she was the first to write back. And [she] said "Yes, why don't you come down?"

And that's how I ended up in Clairfield, Tennessee in the summer of '69, and it was--. The experience changed my life again. Because I think by that time, I was angry at so much that was going on. I was learning every day about new things that were wrong in this country, or more people who were being shoved around. And I was angry a lot of the time, and what was going on in Tennessee was trying to build something. From the ground up. People had a little craft co-op. They had an economic development corporation. They were trying to get health clinics in this very, very poor community with almost no structures or infrastructure in the community. And I also found people who knew so much. It's like, "You don't need to go to college to learn--. My gosh, what do people know here!" Tremendous respect for the wisdom and the know-how and the survival instincts of people. So I started coming down every summer, [and] going back to teach during the year, the wild political environment there.

And then in 1972, [I] just made a jump and decided that I would move to Tennessee with no job, just doing volunteer work or whatever, but that was where I needed to be right then. It turned out that the summer before I moved to Tennessee, which was in June '72, the research that started SOCM [Save Our Cumberland Mountains] had happened in the community. And that was research about, why are these--. It was researched by a group called the Vanderbilt Student Health Coalition, based out of Vanderbilt University, who were having health fairs in some of these rural communities, where there were no doctors. All of the underground mines

had closed and unregulated strip mining was happening, and all the doctors worked for the underground coal companies. [There were] no doctors around, so they started primary health care clinics.

And they also had special research projects, one of which was to say why are these counties so poor? So they did some land ownership and land taxation study, and found figures for what people already knew, which was that in five of Tennessee's highest coal-producing counties, there were ten largely absentee land companies who owned about eighty percent of the mineral land and about thirty-five percent of the land total, and paid about three percent of the taxes. And were basically given a blind eye by the local tax assessors, and at any rate.

And SOCM was formed in the fall of--. It actually formed in January of 1972, but the beginnings were handing over that research to some of these local leaders of health councils, who were trying to get primary healthcare clinics. And some of SOCM's early membership came from the folks who were working on trying to get some healthcare into their communities.

So anyway, when I moved, in June of '72, full-time, I became a member of SOCM. And for the next year and a half [I] became a more and more active member of SOCM. When the first two organizers in SOCM left, they asked me to join the staff. I said no, because they basically were leaving after a year and a half because they worked ninety hours a week. They worked 150 hours a week, if there was 150 hours in a week, and were burnt out after a year and a half. I wanted to live there. And so I said, "No, but I'll do more work. I'll keep volunteering." Well, the story is I'm one of the few people who became a staff person for SOCM. Actually, for thirty-five and a half years, who was never hired. But that's a whole other story. Okay. But that's how loosey-goosey this organization, as it started, was. But all of that is an answer to your question about my life, and how I got to that point.

But it's to make things short, actually for the last thirty-five and a half years I've had the privilege, until last fall when I transitioned out of working for SOCM, of working for a wonderful grassroots organization. And I can talk much more about SOCM, but that's--. The rest of my life fits into sort of SOCM categories. And other things that I think as far as women in SOCM and that kind thing. But did you want to ask another question, or should I just keep talking? [Laughter] I just, I have no idea if this is what you're wanting, but there you go.

JW: [Laughter] That's wonderful. The narrative arc is a good thing to have. But I was going to ask you--. So when you're getting more politically involved, how was your family reacting to that?

MO: Well, my family understood SOCM. Let me just tell you that. Because it was the little people against the big coal companies and land companies and my dad got that. And [he] would ask me about J.W. [Bradley], the president, and "How's he doing?" Because he almost would identify with him as a leader, who was taking things on.

Now, in Louisville, Kentucky, very different. So in my activity with civil rights, being antiwar, I sort of made the mistake of thinking, "Well I'm just acting out values that I learned at home. About 'you do what's right, don't let people be pushed around.'" But especially with my father, it was threatening. It was really threatening to him, especially the antiwar activities. Because to him communism was godless atheism. Note, Irish Catholic, so no other consideration. [Laughter] Book closed.

One time, [he] actually sent me a--. Again, I think I was naïve enough to think, well, of course what I was learning needed to be shared with everyone. And needed to be shared with my family, and that probably they would see it the same way I did because it seemed right. So right to me. There got to be some pretty significant screaming matches between my father and

me. You know, one of my heroes, that I really considered one of my deepest influences. And at one point he wrote me a letter. It was sort of like disowning me, and saying that if I wasn't a Communist I was probably a fellow traveler, and you know. I just--.

It's interesting because when I was in high school, and this would've been in the late fifties, early sixties, I was so proud to have been on this team that had been reading J. Edgar Hoover's books and stuff about [Laughter], you know the Communists, and was on panels, going out to give talks to other schools, and I was so proud of the fact. Yeah, I mean I took in all those values as well. So that's what was so wrenching to me probably when I had to come into my own analysis of what was going on. The civil war [in Vietnam]. We're just wrong. We're just like the French. We're just like every other imperialist that's gone into that country.

But so my father sent me this letter that was really very hurtful, very hurtful to me. But I had sense enough to--. Something snapped in me to say "There's too much at stake here." So I wrote him a very nice letter back, just explaining some things and how much I loved him and what a big influence he'd been in my life. He wrote something back just saying, he threw the punch, and I took it. And had kid gloves or something. Some kind of a masculine image [Laughter]. We ended up agreeing not to talk about certain things. Sometimes he would still, he would bait me a little bit, and I would say "Dad, I think we're getting on dangerous ground." Because in fact, I wasn't going to change him. And in fact, I wasn't just going along with a crowd. It was with wrenching that I had come to some new understandings about what I thought was right.

So we made our peace that way. It was an unsettled peace; nobody was hiding anything from anybody, it was just we couldn't talk about the church, and we couldn't talk about the war. And I was going too far in civil rights, even though he probably told me the story about his father

facing down this mob that was going into the black neighborhoods during the race riots. And saying “You’re big guys, aren’t you?” Like, “What did the English landlords do to us? You’re going to go and innocent women and children and men and go into their neighborhoods, and--.” He was very proud of that, but somehow took on many of the other racist ideas about “They’re going too far,” and “too militant,” and whatever.

I mean I’m not saying I don’t understand. It’s how deeply racism and lack of understanding is rooted in white America and has been for so long. So there are those areas. But we could talk about anything about SOCM. We could talk about some things about labor, and economics. My mom was more apolitical, in some ways. Very very bright woman, very smart woman. [She] just had her hands full. And [she] liked me enough that [she] probably didn’t want to know what I thought about a lot of things [Laughter]. My brothers and sisters suffered me well. I’m the only one, out of the eleven of us, that has the politics that I have, to be honest.

But there are some of my brothers who were stewards for their union, you know at the railroad. And [they] are good people and care and do service work and volunteer things, and don’t have the same politics. They’re good people, and I’m really glad for my background in many ways, and it’s been very helpful to me in organizing. Incredibly helpful to not have been born into a socialist family or something, or assume certain things. Because I know some patterns of how my thinking changed, and I understand where people are coming from who aren’t at a point where they think, you know, the things that I’ve come to think. You start where people are, and I’m not trying to brainwash anybody either, but it’s experiences that I had, and individual people that I met, and that’s part of what organizing is.

Community organizing is helping to create experiences where people learn things together and experience things together. And meet people from other struggles, and struggle

themselves, and come up against “Well I always thought the County Commission, those were good guys. But why are they doing this?” Or come to their own political understanding. So I think it’s helped me, really, in the long run, to be from a working-class background, a not quote “liberal” or “progressive” movement background, and it’s probably who I’ve felt the most comfortable working with. I understand low-income, white working-class people. It’s culturally, of course, in the mountains, I’m not saying it’s the same as growing up second-generation Irish in a neighborhood where everybody your grandfather’s age had an Irish brogue, which is where I grew up, like in an Irish ghetto. More in my father’s culture than my mother’s culture. So, is that enough on that one?

JW: Mmm-hmm! Well, when you were in Louisville, were you--. Did you know Anne Braden, or--.

MO: Oh yes.

JW: Or were you running with that group?

MO: Was I running with that crowd. That’s interesting. Actually I almost mentioned her name, and then I was in the middle of a sentence where it didn’t fit in, and so yes. I would say Anne Braden was a very powerful influence on me as a young teacher in the West End of Louisville, and I was fairly often at the SCEF [Southern Conference Education Fund] office, you know, package stuff. Anne Braden was such a unique person because she was so, she had such radical politics, and yet she was such a human being. She could talk to anybody. And even if you weren’t exactly where she was in politics, it’s--. She didn’t talk jargon. She had it deep, deep inside herself, and could find the ways and the words and the bridges to explain what she thought and offer it, and that’s what I needed. I didn’t need to be brainwashed; I was too independent-minded for that, okay?

I remember a conversation Anne Braden and I had--we did lots of civil rights things together--the white support group for the Black Six. There was a Black Workers Coalition, and a white support group for the Black Workers Coalition, it was very much Anne's mentality for white support for black leadership in whatever the particular organization was. Lots of marches together, lots of, like I say, just folding leaflets and stuff.

I remember at the time, I mean also meeting some people around the SCEF office who did not have much of an influence on me, they weren't necessarily at the SCEF office. They were other movement people in Louisville. I considered myself part of the movement, but when somebody would come up and introduce themselves as "I'm so-and-so, and I'm a neo-Trotskyite, something something something," and I'd say "I'm Maureen O'Connell."

JW: [Laughter]

MO: It just, absolutely the most--. The political jargon, or the analysis of "Have you said that in exactly the right way, so that all the nuances of the movement--." It's like, I would become mute, trying to talk to some people for, "I'm sure I'm saying the wrong thing, because there's a way to say everything." "No, no, no. Just--" So they were not as big an influence on me as Anne Braden was. But I remember a long conversation I had with her at one time, where I said "Anne, what is this socialism, I mean is it the same as communism? I mean why do people call, you know, a socialism--'Are you a socialist?'" I remember having--. She was like a friend, like a mentor. And she said "Yes, I would say I'm a socialist. But it's different from a communist, and these are the ways, and one's a political party; one's an economic thing," and, "Well what is it?" "Well, there's certain--" It's just the way she described: there are certain aspects of society that sometimes people decide would be better run by the government than by

big greedy corporations that are doing it just for profit, and et cetera. You know, it's like it defused the word for me, you know what I mean? It just totally defused the word for me.

But again, what I learned from that, which has been so helpful to me in organizing, is "What are the bridge words?" What are the bridge concepts? What are the ways that you talk, not that people have to think a certain way and a certain line, but you're talking, you know, and you're meeting people in language that is common language. She was a big influence in my life, actually. And probably a radicalize--not probably. A radicalizing influence on my life. And [she] was also a very good friend. Very good friend, and I really wish I'd gotten back more often in the last few decades to talk with her more. I really didn't spend much time in Louisville once I was back in Tennessee, and was just so caught up in the daily life of what-- So I didn't see her before she died, and I really regret that. But yeah. I'm proud to count myself as one of the people she had major influence on, and really a friend during a pivotal time with my own political and social development, I would say. And a great woman. Great woman.

JW: Can you talk a little bit about how the social movements that you were being introduced to in Louisville affected your work, or impacted your work in Tennessee?

MO: Yeah, I would say a couple of things right off that I would think. One is that while in its first years, SOCM was an all-white organization. Its members were people who lived in the most isolated coalfield communities in Tennessee, which were all-white. There wasn't a single African American person living in those communities. It [was] not by design to be an all-white organization, [but] was an all-white organization. I understood it; I welcomed the opportunities that came more in the eighties for SOCM to be more involved in coalitions where there were really a mix of African American people, urban and rural people. A couple of the people whose names I gave you to talk with were originally members of an African American

organization in West Tennessee called JONAH [Just Organized Neighborhoods Area Headquarters]. [It] was essentially an all African American, mostly African American organization, partly because the whites who joined ended up leaving, in West Tennessee. [The members] worked in small towns, rural communities, doing basic community organizing, very similar to SOCM in structure, and even in some issues.

And I loved, as one aspect of what SOCM did in the eighties and partly out of experiences that our members were having with JONAH members in coalitions like the Southern Empowerment Project. [We] had a strong working relationship with each other. I loved that. I would say that came from my sense of knowing that in the South, and in Tennessee, and in many of our members, racism is alive and well. Anything to break that down was also critically important to what both would be, could be very useful and helpful politically, with people working together, and not at each others' throats, and also just because of justice. Because SOCM cared about what was right; it was based on not pushing people around. So the more, you know, expanding that circle to know more people that were being pushed around. But it really worked. And SOCM and JONAH members planned a number of things together, including youth retreats and leadership retreats, and membership challenges met regularly across Middle Tennessee.

Then in the early nineties the opportunity--. SOCM was doing some strategic planning, and embarked upon this idea of doing a growth plan until the year 2000, and what were the kinds of ways the organization wanted to grow. And by that time, some of those relationships were very solid, and one of the sections of that plan was increased diversity and anti-racism work. And members started going to dismantling racism trainings. Kenneth Jones was a wonderful trainer who--. This would've been in the early nineties. Members and staff started going to

those trainers and forming a change team within SOCM and really doing dismantling racism, or now they're calling it more anti-racist training.

It really has shaped a lot of SOCM's development in the last fifteen years to being a more deliberately anti-racist organization; we now have chapters in West Tennessee, it's a more statewide organization, African American chapters as well as white chapters, as well as mixed, Hispanic, African American and white chapters. It's really a core part of SOCM's identity right now. When I left as executive director last fall, the organization hired a fairly young African American woman to be executive director. So I would say in terms of the influences in Louisville, were always there within me for the opportunities that would be organic, real opportunities that people could have to face and to begin that long process white people have to overcome racism and to work constructively in partnership with African American people. And some of that, especially in middle Tennessee, one of our chapters has also included Hispanic people who are moving into some rural counties. That's a real big part of SOCM.

I would say the other aspect of taking things from the quote "movement times" of Louisville was that I was acutely aware of the leadership of women, from the very start, within SOCM. And it's not that it was that hard, because there's some very strong women in the mountains. [They] have to be, to survive. Have to be in many situations. But often, roles were not equal. And often, if left to what would happen naturally in a community, the men would have been the leadership. And wonderful men leaders in SOCM. There's not, as you know, being for women's development doesn't mean being against men's development. But being very, very conscious, from the very beginning time of working with SOCM, that paying special attention to development of women leaders within the organization, that women would be asked and considered for all prominent roles within the organization, and not just me. It's not like it

was something I'm forcing on the organization; there were strong women there. But I'm just saying, in terms of how my own mind, it wasn't necessarily that SOCM worked on quote "women's issues."

In fact, some core women's issues, for many of the women's movement, like abortion, was very divisive within SOCM. Which had people from the Bible Belt in rural conservative communities, and a mix of people who felt one way and felt another way about that issue. [SOCM] was working many times on survival issues: what was directly impacting the community. Whether it was unregulated strip mining, which was like making a war zone that people lived in, of blasting and land slides and flooding. And tackling that, or with toxics, toxic incinerators coming into the community. Or whether it was just the need for basic services, or whether it was such poor counties not having any basic source of revenue because of the land ownership pattern and going after tax fairness, and some of those kinds of issues.

But it was always, I mean there were two things really, when I think of it. One was that it was simply right that women's leadership be developed, and I sensed that women could do it better than men organizers, to be honest with you. And I think that's somewhat true, although there have been some exceptions in SOCM that there have been some very sensitive men organizers who have done a good job, too. The other is that if you are working with men leaders and you're a woman, it's real important you get to know their wives very, very well. So that there's trust, so that there's a sense that if I'm off somewhere at a meeting with their husband, they have utter trust in me, but also I'm going to be inviting them to come along, too.

SOCM's had almost an equal number of presidents who are women, chairs of committees, I mean in leadership posts within the organization. Spokespeople, I don't even know numbers, don't have those kinds of statistics to share, but that it is an organization that has

very much cultivated leadership in women as well as men and many women have served valiantly. I mean, the sheets I gave you were just a few examples of women who have been outstanding leaders. Just outstanding leaders in the organization. Spokespeople, leadership in every--. Leadership in coalitions SOCM has been a part of, et cetera. So I'm giving long answers to questions, aren't I?

JW: That's great. I just want to check the time and make sure that we are--.

MO: Getting close to fifty minutes. I think we are getting close, certainly.

JW: Well, and I re-started that once, so.

MO: Okay.

JW: About the women leaders, you said you thought that they were often the better organizers. Do you have a sense of why that was the case?

MO: What I was saying was that I think that some women organizers are more attuned to making sure women's leadership is developed. That they are attuned to that in some ways that men organizers are not as attuned to it. But I'm saying that SOCM's had a mix of some very good men organizers as well. I think Jonathan Dudley, who was on our staff, was very, very conscious of the development of women. As it's turned out, and this was not by design at all, the overwhelming number of organizers in SOCM have been women. And that wasn't true about organizers in all the neighboring organizations or anything.

It's different now with Kentuckians for the Commonwealth, KFTC, which has a real mix of male and women organizers, but for their early years, KFTC started--. And it's really a sister organization with SOCM in just many, many ways. They started in 1981, about nine years later, and for a long period of time had such a predominance of men organizers that we almost looked like mirror organizations, like we would have one male and seven women, or they would have

seven men and one woman, or--. It was just interesting. So however that happened, it wasn't by deliberation, it wasn't by quota, it wasn't planned. But it just turned out that many women became organizers in SOCM, and so I think there's always been a real conscious, deliberate effort to make sure that women's leadership is developed as well as men's leadership in the organization.

JW: You mentioned gaining the trust of wives of male organizers--.

MO: Male members.

JW: Male members.

MO: Male leaders.

JW: Male leaders.

MO: Yes.

JW: Which gets to some of the interesting gender politics. And I wonder if there was some--. Someone else from another group, another organization, mentioned having to have some discussions with men and women who were partners or who were married, about how the men would enter meetings, or--. The women were the organizers, and the men would kind of come and stand in the room and watch, and they had to make this rule that the men couldn't just come in and watch. they had to participate if they were going to come in.

MO: That's interesting.

JW: But I wonder if there were other--. If you've had similar experiences with gender politics like that.

MO: I would say the first thing that comes to my mind is the number of women whose husbands didn't want them to take the leadership roles that they were growing into. The times when maybe the men would be afraid to be a part of it, or it was too politically costly. Fear--.

It's just in the context of some of the issues SOCM has worked on. it's taken on some of the biggest economic forces in the community. I mean, when you're taking on the coal industry and the land companies and all of their political supporters, it takes a certain tremendous kind of courage, almost, to stick your neck out. And sometimes suffer consequences.

There was a period at SOCM--and I'll come back to your question--but there was a period at SOCM when intimidation was a major, major factor in who joined, who could stand under the pressure, who could be open and honest about being a SOCM member, because there was so much intimidation from the coal industry. And people's houses were burned, people were beat up, lots of threatening phone calls coming in about what was going to happen to you, you know. Just that change did not come easily in small, rural communities dominated by those huge economic forces.

So there were times when either the man himself might not be very active, and the woman wanted to speak up for her children, and for her home, and for her community. And it was not appreciated by her husband. I would say more of it was like working with women as they worked through that, and some of them took steps back, some of them just said, "This is too important," and maybe for the first time in their lives, said to their husband, "I'm sorry, but I'm going to do this." And had a lot of strength in doing that. So I would say in terms of gender, more of it was when for some men, women started acting out of their role. That it should be the men taking the leadership, or if the man said "Let's not get involved," it shouldn't be the women then getting involved. Sometimes it got too hard. Just sort of the gender politics within the family got too tough. And other instances in which the woman just said, "I'm sorry. This is my home, this is my family, and I'm going to do this."

And some tension. It wasn't like there was widespread, huge numbers of divorce or that kind of thing that I can think of, but some real tension in some families. And as an organizer, you sure aren't going to tell anybody what to do. They gotta work through that themselves. But you can be an ear, and you can be the encourager, and a lot of organizing besides recognizing leadership potential and developing that, is being a cheerleader, and you know, support. So I would say that.

Now, in the dynamics of meetings sometimes, where there were times when men would be dominating the discussion, it'd be hard for women to get a word in edgewise, or something like that. That was then an organizing problem. I don't remember times where we said--. What we would do was either some strategies where you had lots of go-arounds, where everybody could talk, or you would, in other words, have some methods where you would ensure participation or you would have some small group breakdown. Sometimes there were trainings about running good meetings, and what participation meant, and what equal participation meant, without necessarily just dealing with it as gender politics.

Because sometimes, you know, it would be--. More often, it would be that a man was dominating--. Men were dominating, and women not. But I'm just saying, there's--. There weren't so many examples of that; there were so many strong women in SOCM. [Laughter] From almost the beginning. (52:30 Versie) Norton would say what she had to say no matter who in the world was going to try to be saying, whether she should or shouldn't say how much. So there are just some very, very tough working-class, strong women who were just fed up, sick of it, and were very courageous at that time.

So those were some of the instances that I can remember more, and handling it either with some trainings. There were a few instances I actually would sit, would talk to some very,

very dominant man as what I saw as communication patterns and who was trying to speak, and some things like that. But often it would be more like in a training context, or like I say, methods that would be used, where you'd make sure all voices got heard. Or chair trainings, and we did lots and lots and lots and lots of leadership trainings in SOCM, and that--. Some of those dynamics would be a part of the facilitation training. Sharing training. How to run good meetings training. Some of the internal things that happened as well as the trainings about developing strategy to fight this particular issue, or to work on this particular campaign, or whatever.

JW: Well you mentioned the intimidation a little bit. When I read about SOCM I'm so struck by how you and the members and organizers had to just--. It was in your face constantly, the power of corporations. Though it should be obvious to all of us how present corporations are in our lives. But I wonder if you can say more about that over the years, and how--. Just your ideas about it, and then has it changed over the years?

MO: Mmm-hmm. I think in the early days of SOCM, SOCM formed as an organization at a meeting in January 1972 that was probably equally attended by strip miners and people who were thinking about forming an organization because they hated strip mining. [Laughter] From the very beginning, this tension was there. Without going into a lot of detail, there was an early win in the fall of '71 when the challenge about these terrible illegal taxation methods on land companies--. Thirteen people from these community health clinics who appealed this to the tax equalization board won. They had gathered hundreds of names on petitions saying these land companies shouldn't get by with this; we need the revenue for our schools, for health, for roads, for all kinds of things in our community. And so after that win, people decided to get together and say "Do we need a--. There's lots of problems here. Especially, how about unregulated strip

mining?” Right? Which is just tearing down the mountains and the process is with no laws on a steep mountain slope, you just take off the trees, throw them down the mountain, you take off the rock, you throw it down the mountain, take off all the earth which you call “spoil,” and throw it down the mountain. It ends up in the creeks, it ends up in people’s lands, terrible landslides, people can’t get out to go to work--. Kids riding school buses. I mean flooding, terrible flooding of streams. So I mean unregulated strip mining is like living in a war zone. It is not pretty. So like, “Maybe we should take that on next! We took on the land companies, how about--”

This is not classic community organizing theory, let me tell you. Which we were not, nobody was a theorist at that point. It was just like “These are problems,” right? You know, classic community organizing theory says take on something winnable first and get people’s confidence on that, and gradually build strength so that--. No. We took on the biggest economic forces in the area. The idea was, “Let’s maybe form an organization, and see if we can maybe tackle some of these other problems together.”

And I was not at that meeting; it was in January of ’72, [and] it was my last year of teaching in Louisville. From what I’ve heard, graphically, there were a great big crowd of people that showed up. They had gotten in touch with all of the folks who’d signed these petitions, so a good number of folks from the community who wanted to form an organization, the strip miners heard about it and came as well. And quite a dynamic of who wants to form an organization, some people standing up and other people shouting and jeering them down or whatever.

So from that start [Laughter], which is kind of how the organization started. I think that it was almost unbelievable to the corporate coal and land companies that this little cocky startup organization would last. And so if you lean on them heavy, they’ll fold. People lived in coal

camps, you know, which were dominated by coal companies. And where, if you ever challenged anything, you were thrown out of your house. You were thrown off the camp. There were some SOCM members who had been thrown out of three or four land company camps in their life before SOCM. So I think there was that sense that if you just do what's always worked, it's going to work this time, too.

So from the very beginning, there was a tremendous amount of intimidation. Lots of meetings where strip miners would come and try to break up the meeting. Lots of phone calls to people just saying, "You better not show up at this meeting," or, "You better watch your back for the rest--," threatening to be beat up. I remember--. This was almost every day's business. It got to the point--.

I'll just briefly go ahead and say, by the early to mid-eighties, SOCM members had this come-to-the-altar realization at some point. I mean, we still had maybe six hundred members in these counties, who were SOCM members. And it's like SOCM membership, there were people who we had worked with for sometimes years who had never joined SOCM. And what we realized and took stock of was that there was this kind of bunker mentality, that only the brave and strong and courageous would ever join SOCM [Laughter]. Like "What were you asking people to do? Put their lives on the line?" And it was just this moment of saying "What are we doing? Wait a minute. This is a great organization to join. It's up to people whether or not--." But we weren't--. I mean, we were asking people to join. But it's like, you would work with people if they weren't joining [Laughter].

It was a very loose organization, which the whole thing about SOCM's understanding about community organizing and how that developed over the years and how that changed, is another whole side trend that we may not have time for at all in this interview. But it was a

dramatic--. There were really some things that we learned about community organizing. Nobody--. We didn't even call ourselves organizers. We were like, "staff," or "community workers," or something in those early years.

But I remember this one early instance, I would say--. Let me just go back quickly to my background. I am the second-oldest of eleven. My older sister Kathy was a fighter. I mean a physical fighter, okay?

JW: [Laughter]

MO: Anybody who pushed her brothers and sisters around--. I mean, when I think about growing up, there were fights all the time. Physical fights all the time, growing up in this working-class neighborhood. And she was a fighter. In my early life, because I was just one year younger, and a couple of my brothers were two and three years younger than me, she would fight us, too. So I became a pacifist out of survival, at the age of about six.

JW: [Laughter]

MO: Where I said, "I don't fight," meaning, "I don't want to get beat up anymore!" Now these were not some major principle or something, it's not like it sounds. Well, kind of like it sounds. But I didn't live my whole life in intimidation. But I never considered myself that particularly strong or courageous, from the time I chose nonviolence for survival. [Laughter] Even though, I would say, in civil rights marches and stuff like that, there were times when our marching for United Farm Worker boycott--. You know, there's a whole bunch of stuff [that I did] in Louisville where people would be cussing at you and telling you to go back to Russia and I'd say, "I never been to Russia, what is going on? Wait!" [Laughter] Just sort of mind-blowing that you were kind of like one of them, no wait, what is this?

But at any rate, I learned courage from SOCM members. I want to just say this. I learned it some from civil rights folks too, from African American people. I remember this one meeting in Elk Valley where we had been working with this little local community, and all hell was breaking loose on the mountains. There were about fifteen people, maybe ten or fifteen people, almost all older people, who had gotten together and said, or who we had talked with and said, "Yeah, I think we need a local organization here to do something about this."

So we called a meeting and nobody at that point had joined SOCM, but that was going to be the last thing on the agenda, just to ask people if they wanted to join the organization. I think the dues were two dollars a year at that point. You know, just making it, just so people would put something down to say they wanted to belong. So we get to this meeting and in comes Dean Chambers and a bunch of toughs from the coal--owned a trucking company and from the coal company. There were maybe, I don't know, ten or twelve very big, bruising guys who were at this meeting and interrupting everything that was going on. Jeering at people, shouting them down.

Well, the agenda that was lined up was shortened. Let me just say. At that time, there were a couple of folks that were on our staff. At that point, I and a few of these local guys, Boomer Winfrey and Johnny Burris, were the staff of SOCM. We were all at this meeting. This was like our first meeting there in Elk Valley. And it was very, very, very tense. At some point, we got pretty quickly down to the last item on the agenda, which was "Does anybody want to join SOCM?" So they said, "Would anybody here like to join SOCM," and this is--. I was scared, to be honest. And I was so glad that Johnny and Boomer were there, who had Tennessee accents, which I have unfortunately never been able to naturally acquire, which I would've loved

if I had, right? But I was mute. Besides that, it was members talking about things, but Johnny and Boomer were there; I was very glad they were there, and they're both pretty big guys, too.

At some point then it was like "Alright." I didn't even think they'd bring up that point about "Do you want to join SOCM?" One by one, every one of these old people walked right in front of Dean Chambers and all of those thugs and guys jeering at them and plunked their two dollars down. Right in front of them. I tell you, I could cry talking about it. It did something to me! And it's like, "My gosh, I've seen courage. I have seen courage." And it really made me a lot stronger; I'll be honest. I learned so much from--. I continued to learn so much from people, but it's like one example.

Then there was the example of the Wartburg Massacre, as it came to be called, where in 1978, I mean these guys sometimes would also show up at public hearings. There was a hearing about a water quality permit, and J.W. Bradley, who at that time was president of SOCM, or I think had just stepped down from being president. Betty Anderson I think was president. But he was one of the local leaders there in Morgan County, but yeah, there was a whole crowd of people there to talk about this really bad permit that was coming in right up above the community, and the well water and everything else would've been affected. And so people were going to testify, and the other whole side of the courtroom--it was held in a courtroom--what was noticeable is it wasn't strip miners and their families and children, which would've been effective, if you'd said "We have jobs." And that's one of the hardest things about the work SOCM did, was it was an area of such high unemployment that sometimes strip mine jobs, even though the underground mining jobs that were forced out, provided hundreds of people with work. The few jobs that there were, were in strip mines.

But this time, there were no women and children and it was very odd that there were just all these big burly guys there. And they were just shouting down people, and some people got up [who were trying to testify] and they were scared to even talk. And of course J.W. talked, and a number of people did. And at the conclusion of the hearing, I was sitting next to J.W. and just out of the corner of my eye saw this whole rush of people coming at him and just start beating J.W. to a pulp, right there in the courtroom. And the water quality officials who were there were hiding behind the podium. I mean, there was no law enforcement or anything there. Several of us got in the way and also got thrown around and stuff at that point. We went immediately to the Wartburg sheriff's office, who said, "Well, these other guys have been here. I've heard the other side of the story. So I know." [Laughter] And one of the women said, "Did any one of them have blood on him?" J.W. bleeding profusely, a couple of us, you know, bruised and whatever. And he says, "Well, you know, that's your side of the story." There was just so much political collusion with the coal industry at that point, so. I got off on that story, but it just--.

There were many instances. There were times in SOCM's history in the late seventies when people used to stay at each others' houses when they would leave to go somewhere because they were afraid they'd get burned out. And there were, in one year, there were about six, about three homes and I think six buildings that were burned, of SOCM members. Because they had been lobbying, or testifying somewhere, or resisting wildcat strip mining, which is mining completely without a permit. So then there was, in 1977, as the federal strip mine law was being debated in Congress, and the coal industry and all of central Appalachia decided to focus their organizing--. They laid off all of their workers, and then brought their workers together in these great big rallies, where thousands of people would come. And there were two sites, main sites for those rallies. One of them was Wise, Virginia, and the other was Clairfield,

Tennessee, where I lived. It was like the wild west. People running up and down the roads with loudspeakers saying "To hell with SOCM! We'll rape your women!" [Laughter]. It was just a pretty incredibly tense time. Ironically, SOCM was one of the organizations who, when the bill passed--the bill passed in 1977--we asked Jimmy Carter to veto it because it wasn't strong enough. So that's ironic. [Laughter]

JW: [Laughter] And he did? Or he didn't?

MO: No, he did not. He signed it. It's, again, there's many sub-stories about the work. And I know that your topic can't handle all the aspects of SOCM's various campaigns and various confrontations with oppressive corporate energy conglomerate, which has made Appalachia a Third World, and continues to in some ways, with mountaintop removal mining and a lot of what's going on. It's not the same as how it was, you know, thirty years ago. But there's still many ways in which intimidation still is used, and it continued in SOCM, too.

JW: I'm going to pause us, so that we don't--. [Recorder shuts off and back on again.] Okay. So we're back on. I wanted to ask you about SOCM's relationship to another movement: the environmental movement.

MO: Mmm-hmm, mmm-hmm. Yes. I would--. You just don't want to give one-word adjectives for something that's complex. In the early days of SOCM, people thought SOCM members--again, largely people who lived right there in the coalfields who were fighting for survival--when they were called environmentalists by the opposition, considered it an insult. No, they weren't just people who liked to look at mountains from afar, or hike or something. These were their homes. These were their communities. They were fighting for survival of those communities. And it wasn't that they hated environmentalists; they just didn't consider themselves environmentalists. They considered themselves a people's group, an action group, a

local citizens' group. And [they] knew that the people calling them that were trying to discredit them at that point. I would say it's very much more mixed.

Over the years, there are people who identify themselves as environmentalists who are SOCM members; there are still many people who would primarily--. Most people, I would say generally speaking, SOCM members don't consider SOCM as a classic environmental organization. Since the term "environmental justice" has been used in the last ten or fifteen years, people can resonate with that. It's like, "Why are these kinds of developments always happening in places where low-income, working-class people live?" They're not where the rich folks live; they're often where African American people live, but in terms of coal, it's white working-class or low-income people. But it's that movement on that term makes a lot of sense. There are certainly SOCM members who would say, "Yes, we are proud to be environmentalists, and SOCM is an environmental organization," but it's always been of a different ilk. It's always been, first of all, very democratic and grassroots, and not just sort of signing on to anything that's an environmental issue, because the main concern is anything that has to do with environment. I think people, and I would say relationships with environmental organizations, even in Tennessee, and national environmental organizations, has been mixed. Experiences have been mixed.

From great support and allies on key campaigns, and I would say in the--. Especially in the seventies and eighties, environmental groups in Tennessee sort of looking to SOCM to take the lead on coal issues. Because [they knew] it had a grassroots niche. So sometimes [they were] strong allies on campaigns. To the other end of it, which are a couple of examples, environmental organizations fought against SOCM because they decided certain things were more important than the things SOCM wanted.

And one of those examples was once there was a law on the books that--. This was when SOCM was working on toxics. It's not only coal SOCM has worked on, I tell you. If we had enough time to talk about solid waste, and toxics, and temporary workers, and state tax reform, and all kinds of other issues that affect people. There was a law on the books that gave local authorities, local counties, the right--almost a veto power--over the siting of incinerators or hazardous waste facilities in communities. And that was something that SOCM very much wanted to keep because any avenue you've got to try to fight some big thing coming in, you want to try to keep. And to keep that local authority was another place for strategy. And was helpful in some instances for people stopping things that were coming into the community.

It turned out that this particular statewide environmental organization decided to compromise away that provision of the law in order to get some more superfund money for something else. And it wasn't pretty down in Nashville. We were fighting and fighting. And very confused legislators, I will say, seeing these environmental organizations saying, "Yes, we don't mind if this leaves, if you move--. If we've got this deal." It was just a horrible example of the differences between what affects people locally, and--. So I think sometimes in terms of what is easily compromised, or sacrificed, there's probably a reason why in some circles SOCM has had a reputation of being quote, "too radical," or "uncompromising," although in winning certain pieces of legislation over the years--which we have--we certainly have compromised. As members themselves took a look at, "Was there something so substantial to win here that we could give this one part up?"

At a state level, it's been mixed. Sometimes very strong support from environmental organizations, sometimes--a few times--almost working against each other. I think with national environmental organizations, it's, again--. I think more the issue is some national environmental

organizations doing all of the deciding, doing all of the strategizing, doing everything up there and then wanting people quickly to sign on. Or wanting people to come up with one day's notice to testify about something that they've basically developed, not very much respecting the role of grassroots folks who have a say themselves. Which is basically what community organizing is about. It is the democratizing of this country, where regular folks can have a say about what happens, and so this sort of sign-on mentality.

The other thing is, again, cutting deals. Just cutting deals and doing it as a national advocacy group. There's a lot of difference between advocacy and community organizing. But that's not to say there hasn't been great good done by national environmental organizations, too. I think the Sierra Club in recent years has really developed a much more active environmental justice component within their organization, and a couple of very good staff people for the Sierra Club [have been] working in central Appalachia, and working very closely with grassroots groups and trying to find ways that they can both help the organizations and provide whatever the resources of the Sierra Club are to the particular campaign. And especially around mountaintop removal mining. It's not a sweeping statement that I would ever make, but there's certainly been some tension as well as some support.

JW: Let's see. [pause] One thing I was thinking about as you were talking is that it seems like SOCM has connected a broader range of issues than sometimes the single movements allow.

MO: That's right.

JW: Can you say a little more about that?

MO: That's right, and I can remember in the early nineties, when SOCM was working with a group of folks who were in Hamblen County, over in the Morristown area, where a big

GE plant had shut down and then re-hired workers as temporary workers in order to pay less salary, and to have virtually no benefits. And there was a tremendous movement--. There still is a tremendous amount of temporary work where that's the only kind of work you can get in small manufacturing plants in this state. SOCM was working with people there directly, and we ended up working also with the Tennessee Industrial Renewal Network (TIRN) and other organizations to develop a bill in the state legislature. I can still remember, as SOCM members were going down there, and it really struck a nerve. We were wondering, we went to the SOCM board, whether or not this would seem like a thing SOCM would take a position on. Even though it was coming from a grassroots group that was asking for our support. And it really struck a nerve; there were probably half of the people who were on the board who lived in communities where the same problem was happening with temporary workers. Basically being abused.

So we went to Nashville for a couple of years, and got as close as a tie on this bill about the abuse of temporary workers, did not win that one, but it was like--legislators would say, "What are you doing here on a bill like this?" [Laughter] "We've said, SOCM works on economic, environmental, and social justice issues that affect its members and affect the welfare of people in Tennessee, and here's one of them." But it was like, "Whoa, what's SOCM doing working on a labor issue?" You know?

JW: [Laughter]

MO: Well, it's so. So that broader range. And I think with social justice issues--. I mean, we were the lead organization in trying to get voting rights for ex-felons. Over a hundred thousand people in Tennessee can't vote because at some point in the past, they have been convicted of a felony. And there's this mishmash of laws where if you've committed a certain crime in certain years, you might be able to get your voting rights back, but if it was in certain

other years you never can get your voting rights back, but if it's these crimes, you never can. And so we were taking that, and again, people were saying, "What are you doing on this issue?" Well, we had a whole constituency of people in some of our middle Tennessee chapters who saw this problem and experienced it in their communities, of people who couldn't vote. So it was.

Yeah, there have been times SOCM's been a real surprise to the public officials as well as other organizations. It's a social justice niche. It's environmental, economic, social justice. It is not an environmental organization, it's not a put-it-in-a-[box]. It's really a community organization, just working for the right of people to have a say about all kinds of things that affect their lives.

During this time that we don't have time to talk about more SOCM's internal development--. It's also understanding a little bit more about organizing and critiquing itself, and coming to some understanding about, "Oh, we're part of this thing called community organizing. There's things we have to learn about the people who do this." But at that point, there was a critical moment in the very late seventies to early eighties, when SOCM members themselves had a long series of planning meetings, and said "We are not merely an issue, like a coal issue, organization. We are a grassroots community organization, and we will work on the issues that people care about. And that opened a greater and wider array of the kinds of things that--. I mean, SOCM can't work on everything.

So it's things that come from the grassroots up; we have to go through taskforces and committees, and through the board. It's a very democratic organization, very run by members. It's not a knee-jerk, just sign on to everything because it's just as good as apple pie and motherhood, you know? It's like, "Where do you want to put your muscle?" Behind some pieces, some campaigns, some facets of justice work that you really are going to invest in.

That's been more of what the organization has done. So it's not been easy to stereotype. We keep slipping in and out of those stereotypes that people have. You know, it's just more. It's different, more--.

JW: What have been the proudest moments in your career organizing?

MO: Oh, wow. It would be hard to put it in a particular story or something. I would say the proudest moments are a mix of seeing people--who absolutely would never have seen themselves in any kind of leadership role about anything--sitting and negotiating with the Conservation Commissioner. Being the key spokesperson at the rally. Doing things they absolutely have overcome so much fear, and so much reticence and lack of confidence, and are doing. So I love those places and seeing leadership development. I've loved seeing the growing awareness of the need for antiracism work, in any kind of justice work, and many, many members internalizing that. And I love wins. I love big-issue wins where maybe it's taken four or five years, or maybe it's taken six or eight years. And people take every loss, and there's probably fifteen of them that have happened in the course of those four, five, eight years, and learned from it. And re-strategized, and got more people involved. Found more people affected, done whatever, and have won.

That sense of power that can happen, and that people themselves know they've done it. It's not a lawyer who's done it for them; it's not some advocate who's done it for them. It's not staff, who in SOCM can't even testify at a public hearing or chair a meeting, or do things, because otherwise people would look to us to do it. They know they won it. And they won it with thousands of their own hours. I could name wins, but that's less important, what the actual wins are than what has gone into it. And where people in SOCM, over time, there were some people in SOCM who got discouraged after a year or two because strip mining didn't stop. And

they thought they could stop strip mining. And it didn't stop. But I think over time, people see losses as things to learn from. And then you regroup. What did you learn--what else? What's your analysis? What did they throw at you? What's the different way that you can cut the issue?

It's just like it proves the need for a community organization for the long haul. They've seen it work, that it doesn't happen in two years. But it did happen in six. And there were all these losses in the way. It's a rollercoaster! I can't think of a single thing that's been sort of like a straight, easy win. We just don't get easy wins very much at all. But there are some wins. And there's heartbreaking losses. All those are wonderful moments, really.

JW: What's the state of things, of this organizing work now?

MO: Well, when I left as director last fall, I'd left with a very, very strong sense that I have implemented, which is to get out of the way. [Laughter] I've worked for thirty-five and a half years for an organization, there's no way I'm just going to take a little role and not mess it up. And I've heard that from other--. I've done lots of reading on organizational management; I've done lots of talking with people who know former directors who didn't have the sense, when they left, to leave and get out of the way.

I have utter, utter confidence in this grassroots organization and nothing I've seen since, in the last year, that has changed that since. That's a wonderful, member-run group of members, and a good solid competent staff, that the organizing is going well and will continue to go well in the future. I'm sure there's lots of bumps, but I don't even know them from the inside. Because I'm not asking those questions, and I'm not really--. I'm so clear about that. So what exactly I do next is sort of a challenging thing to me right now.

I wanted definitely to take some time off, and just to get clear and have some reflection time, and I've had some wonderful traveling that I've been able to do, and extra time with family

and stuff. I really am on the lookout right now for what I might still have to contribute to social change work. I'm still in great health, which is good.

It was just a good time for the inevitable transition that was needed in SOCM, so I--. I believe in organizing as a method for social change. It is the most democratizing method I know. I love the old CIO cry about "organize the unorganized." Don't just bring together people who are already joiners and speak to the choir and work on the margins, but where are the places where regular folks--just regular, good, human beings, like most human beings are--can come to some action and some knowledge and some change that they themselves are creating? And I don't know a better way to do that than community organizing, to be honest. So. That's it.

JW: Well is there anything else you would like to add, or any questions?

MO: No, I think we're fine. Yeah. Talked a lot. Better go so they don't tow my car
[Laughter]. I think I signed up for two hours.

JW: We're right on time. Well, thank you again.

MO: Yeah, you're very welcome, Jessie.

END OF INTERVIEW.

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