

Communications Workers of America Oral History Project

Interviewee: Cummings, Claude

Interviewer: Debbie Goldman and Jeff Rechenbach

Date of Interview: September 11, 2024

Place of Interview: Washington, D.C.

Page Total: 25

A raw transcript of the interview was first produced by machine via Trint.com. The raw transcript was then audited and edited by Hannah Goldman and reviewed by Debbie Goldman. The following transcript was then reviewed, edited, and approved by the interviewee. This is the official record of the interview. Readers are asked to bear in mind that they are reading a transcript of the spoken word rather than written prose.

Jeff [00:00:00] I'm Jeff Rechenbach. We're here today in Washington, D.C. on September 11th, 2024 with Claude Cummings, Debbie Goldman, and Hannah Goldman to conduct an oral history interview with the president of the Communications Workers [of America], Claude Cummings. 23 years ago today, you could see the smoke from the Pentagon from this vantage point right here. [The interview took place on the 11th floor of CWA headquarters at 501 Third St NW, Washington DC.] Claude, what we'd like to do and what we've done with everybody else that we've talked to is really start with your early life and just sort of move forward your progression, how you came to be the person that you are today. So can you tell us about when you were born and where and what the circumstances were?

Claude [00:00:49] Sure. Again, Claude Cummings, President of the Communications Workers of America. I was born in Houston, Texas, October 20th, 1951. So I am 72 years old and in a couple of months I'll be 73. Thank God for that. Again in Houston, Texas, I attended Kashmere High School where I was active there in ROTC. I was also president of our class and I was the editor for the school newspaper. So I was pretty active there. I enjoy singing. So I started singing with some guys there that I'm still singing with. But interesting times, interesting times for me. We were the last midterm class to graduate from Kashmere. I actually graduated in January of 1970. We were encouraged to go to summer school so we would not have a midterm class, but the [19]69 class, which is the class we would have graduated in, had so many smart students in it. I mean, some of those that came out of that class are doctors, attorneys and others. And so we wanted to stay with the group that that we had been with for some time because we were going to graduate at a higher percentage than we would have had we stayed in the [19]69 class. So we were the last midterm class to graduate from Kashmere High School. Then from there I attended Tuskegee Institute for a couple of years. Unfortunately, I did not graduate. But it was interesting, interesting times there.

Jeff [00:02:51] What did your parents do?

Claude [00:02:53] My dad actually was a janitor for AT&T. He started working for AT&T in 1946 as a janitor. My mother was a beautician, and my dad is one who believed that wives should work, but they should not work away from home. (laughs) And my mother wanted to be a beautician, so he actually built a beauty shop for her adjacent to our home so she could care for us and be at home because he thought it was important that she was there to see after us. So interesting, interesting times.

Jeff [00:03:33] So 1946, at the telephone company as an African-American, I'm guessing the jobs that were open were jobs like a janitor, those lower-paid jobs. Am I correct?

Claude [00:03:48] That's correct. That's correct. During those years, a Black man could do nothing but janitorial work. Now, oddly enough, I found out that there were Black women that were hired to be operators during those times but Black men could do nothing but janitorial work. Interesting enough, my dad's first fight was not with AT&T. It was actually with CWA. Well, one other interesting thing about my dad. My father, in the 1946, 1947 time frame was on a 15-minute break. He worked at the Capitol building in downtown Houston. And during his break, he happened to look out the window. He was working on the first floor and saw this nice-looking woman standing at a bus stop. And so he started flirting with her. And flirting turned into a date, turned into marriage. And a couple of years later, I showed up. So I'm actually a product of both CWA and AT&T. (both laugh)

Jeff [00:04:57] Right.

Claude [00:04:59] But, those years were tough for those janitors.

Jeff [00:05:05] You started to say his first fight --

Claude [00:05:08] His first fight was actually with the union because during those years and this is of course during the years when Tommy Parsons and Joe Gunn were leading the Houston local at that time, local 6222. They met on separate nights. White men met on one night. Black janitors met on another night. Everyone needs to understand clearly that those janitors had actually formed a relationship with those white technicians. They cleaned up behind them and things of that nature. So they really formed a sort of a bond. And so the question came up about why is it we're paying the same amount of dues under this dues structure but we meet on one night and all of you meet on another night.

Claude [00:06:01] And so the janitors actually approached the leadership at that time about a different type of arrangement and there was pushback from the leadership. This is the way things are. This is the way they're going to be. And so of course the janitors then took the position that, well, if you're not going to change, then our idea is that we need our own union and we're going to break away from CWA and form our own union. And so white men at that time understood economics real well. (laughs) Because we had a number of Black men that were janitors working at that time. And so the idea of dues being taken away did not sit well with the leadership. The other interesting thing that happened is those white technicians in the workplace said, listen, they're right. Why can't they meet on the same night? We work with these guys every day. They clean up behind us. We've gotten to know them. We've gotten to know their families. There's no reason why we should meet on separate nights. My dad helped lead that fight and so that rule was changed and shortly after several meetings, they started all meeting on the same night at local 6222.

Jeff [00:07:32] I'm guessing ironically back at that time frame that it was a flat rate dues.

Claude [00:07:36] Yes.

Jeff [00:07:36] So even though the janitors were paid less than the technicians, they were paying the exact same amount of money as those technicians.

Claude [00:07:43] Exactly right.

Jeff [00:07:45] So did your father spend his entire career --

Claude [00:07:48] So my father started as a janitor and he moved from a janitorial position to a stockman position and he actually would just deliver supplies to other buildings other than the Capitol building. From there he became a frame attendant and then a switch man. So he actually retired as a switch man. Couple of other interesting things that happened during that process, especially as technology began to change. My dad started as a step switch man, and it was really interesting to watch him sit in a center and -- I get questioned all the time. Let me just talk about this for a minute. AT&T probably has more buildings, I think, than any other business other than the US government. That's because their switches, the technology at that time, was so antiquated now based on what -- so much different than what we have now, I should say. A step switch was huge. Each house had to have a step switch in order to be able to transmit a call. It had levels on it. I would take my father lunch occasionally. And I watched him as he was eating lunch stop and listen for what he heard was a malfunctioning step switch. And I thought all these switches that are in this building but he can hear that one that is not operating properly. And I watched him walk until he found that switch and he was able to repair it. I mean, he was a hell of a technician. He really was.

Jeff [00:09:39] Isn't that remarkable.

Claude [00:09:40] Very, very remarkable. And, of course, after step switches, we had crossbar switches. My father was at a time where he was trying to think about if he was going to work longer or how much the new technology he really wanted to try to grasp. He finally made a decision that it may be time to go, but with seniority, he had the right to stay on as long as he wanted to even if there were surpluses and things of that nature. And so what would happen, interesting, during that period of time, he began to move around the different offices and run jumpers, preparing for the new technology that was about to take place. But management got to a place where they felt like it was just time to try to force him off the payroll. Okay. So what they would do is they would send my father to school. Now, they understood clearly he didn't finish high school. And so the idea was to set him in these classes with white men who could read because their thoughts were, he's not going to be able to read. He learned the job watching others do the work. But he hasn't read anything that has really prepared him to be able to do this, do this work. But they were wrong. My dad could read very well. And in some cases when they sent him to school, he read better than some of the white technicians that were there. And at one time he read so much better than others within the class that the instructor got pissed off and actually shut down the class and sent everybody back to work. (both laugh).

Jeff [00:11:43] That's amazing.

Claude [00:11:44] It's amazing. But those are the type of things that were taking place during that period of time.

Jeff [00:11:52] If they made up their mind to get rid of you, they were going to figure out a way to try and do it.

Claude [00:11:55] Listen. In Pasadena, Texas my father was sent to work there again with the idea of placing him in a situation where he would feel uncomfortable. The Pasadena Greenwood office was right across the street from the White Citizens Council. And for those of you who don't know what the White Citizens Council is, it's the Ku Klux Klan. My father would get out of his car to go into that building and he would get harassed every day, every day. But he wouldn't say anything about it. But he would get in and he would go to work, his first several weeks there. And the more he worked, the more the technicians that were there, white technicians, got to know him and appreciate him. So one day he was threatened with bodily harm while going into the building. And one of the white technicians heard about it, switch men heard about it, and said, Claude, how long has this been going on? And my dad said, it's been going on for some time now. So he said, why didn't you tell us so we could help you? Said we're not going to let them bother you like this. And so they actually started meeting my dad in the mornings when he would drive up, walk him inside the building, and in the evenings, they were walking back out to their car and they would say to them, if you're going to mess with him, you got to mess with us first. And so that actually took place. But my dad ended up retiring from that office. The Klan headquarters moved on to some other place. But those were interesting times. Those were interesting times.

Jeff [00:13:53] Isn't that really what the union was about, though?

Claude [00:13:55] Yes, that's what unions are.

Jeff [00:13:57] His coworkers step up and the injury of one is the injury of everyone.

Claude [00:14:02] Right. Right. Right. Right.

Jeff [00:14:04] Cool. So, siblings?

Claude [00:14:08] Yes, I have two brothers and one has passed on, unfortunately, from pancreatic cancer. He actually worked for AT&T. He was a CST.

Jeff [00:14:19] Are you the oldest of the three?

Claude [00:14:20] I'm the oldest.

Jeff [00:14:21] I assumed when you said your father's name was Claude.

Claude [00:14:25] Right. I'm Junior. And I have a son, of course, that's the Third.

Claude [00:14:33] Yeah, but those were interesting times, interesting times for my dad. And I would enjoy listening to him talk about the things that he would have to deal with on the job. Another interesting thing is that when I decided to run for office, many of the technicians who knew my dad but did not know me actually thought they were voting for my dad. Many of them told me, man, we had no idea we were voting for you, we thought we voted for your dad. We were all trying to figure out what the hell does Claude want to do at this age, running for a union job. But he was so well respected that they said if he wants to run, we're going to vote for him. Something as simple as that.

Jeff [00:15:15] So you really rode his coattails into office?

Claude [00:15:17] I rode his coattails into office. I did. I did.

Jeff [00:15:21] So normally we start with when you're born and sort of go forward. But I have to ask you, you sent out a letter a couple of months ago that talked about voting rights and your grandparents, I think. Can you talk a little bit about that story and what they had to endure to be able to vote down in Texas?

Claude [00:15:52] What I was talking about during that period of time was -- Maybe I should talk about my wife. Going to Tuskegee I met my wife, Ruth. Ruth is from Selma, the heart of the civil rights movement. Right. She would talk about stories that are things that they had to endure as children in the civil rights movement. Ruth was involved in marches. Her brothers were involved in marches. And so she understood clearly and her family understood clearly that there are so many that sacrificed so much for us to be able to vote. I saw my father cry for the first time openly when Dr. King was assassinated. And that is what really got my attention about the civil rights movement and me beginning to take more interest in what the civil rights movement was about. Some might ask, well, why did you decide at that time to get involved in this?

Claude [00:17:13] It's because, listen, I lived in a community where, and I'm not sure I've answered the question yet, but I'll get there. [I] lived in a community that was self-sufficient. We had Black stores. We had Black movies. We had Black tailors. I did not have to leave my community for anything. Funeral homes, grocery stores, I mean, you name it. And so I didn't see racism as my wife saw it because we were just in a different place as far as civil rights and racism was concerned. And so after watching my dad cry after Dr. King became assassinated, it made me understand clearly that I needed to get more involved and understand clearly what this voting rights was all about, what the marches were about and things of that nature. Of course politics closest to your community affects you more than from a distance. I know everybody is interested in what's happening in the presidential race. I get that. But you're affected more by what happens with your city council, with your school boards and things of that nature. How do you fix some of that stuff? You've got to fix it through voting. That's one of the things that I have tried to impress upon young people that don't, for whatever reason, see the importance of wanting to vote. If you want to change what's going on

in your life daily, you need to vote for those who believe as you believe and who see things as you see them. Because there are so many that don't. And if you want to make change, you can make change happen. But you've got to vote. That's why I have become a civil rights activist. Of course, I'm also on the board of directors of the NAACP. You don't change things unless you get active yourself and have a conscious effort to try to get others to do what's needed. We talk about worker power on the job all the time by being unionized and negotiating a union contract so workers will have rights. How do you have rights in your community? Right. You bond together and you vote to make a difference so you can have the power you need to effectively change those things that you see that are not right.

Jeff [00:20:01] And so the powers that be back in the day would do everything they can and still do today to restrict our right to vote.

Claude [00:20:08] They still do. I live in a state with the governor [Greg Abbott] that's in a wheelchair that's making it more difficult for those in a wheelchair like him to vote. How crazy is that? And we're not just talking about Black folk in a wheelchair, we're talking about white men and women that are in wheelchairs. He's making it more difficult to vote. So why are they doing that? Because there's power in the vote. Simple as that. Those in this community have the power to make a difference if they use it. That's why I'm such an advocate for voting and fighting for voting rights. Because that's how we make changes in this country through voting.

Jeff [00:20:52] So can you share a little bit with us about the poll tax.

Claude [00:20:58] Sure. My father has I have a copy of a poll tax receipt where he paid \$1.50 back in 1946 and 1947 for the right to vote. And think about that and think about 1946, 1947, \$1.50. That was a lot of money back then. But he felt the importance and the need to spend that in order to have a voice on who was going to represent him in his city. And we have that right now, [we] don't have to pay. And it's a shame that we don't take advantage of it.

Jeff [00:21:43] So you literally had to pay this \$1.50 in order to vote.

Claude [00:21:47] Right.

Jeff [00:21:48] And clearly cut out thousands of poor people who couldn't scrape it together.

Claude [00:21:57] And of course you had to deal with the other stuff that comes with that. How many bubbles and bottle of bubbles.

Jeff [00:22:05] Right.

Claude [00:22:07] How many jellybeans in a jar?

Jeff [00:22:08] Literacy tests.

Claude [00:22:09] Literacy tests. Those kind of things actually took place and a lot of people don't believe it, but those things are for real. You'd be surprised when I speak about the need to register and vote and I pull this out. I normally pull that poll tax receipt out and show it. How many people, especially young people, come up and take a picture of it and say, I've heard these stories, but I didn't know they were true. They felt this was some type of fairy tale, like Santa Claus and other things. They didn't know that this actually existed and this actually happened in our country. And that's why it disturbs me so when I hear some say that they don't want to exercise their right now to vote free of costs. All you need to do is register. In Texas where I feel like our democracy is on the

line. I feel like it's on the line a lot of places, to be quite honest with you. But we live in a state now that has more Black people living in it than any other state in this country. So we're not, and I say this all the time, we're non-voting states, not that we're a red state. We're just a non-voting state. We can actually become blue quick if we could get those in the state that have not registered and voting, register and get them to vote.

Jeff [00:23:42] Well, we could spend all day talking about voting and the power of the vote. But let's go back to your life. So, go ahead.

Claude [00:23:55] Before you go back to that, I'd like to tell a story, if I could, about Ruth.

Jeff [00:23:59] This is what it's about. I was going to go to Ruth at this point. So go.

Claude [00:24:04] An interesting story about my wife. Her and her mother actually fed marchers that were marching and demonstrating. Ruth's home is right on Highway 80. You can see the Edmund Pettus Bridge from their homestead that's still there. And a couple of interesting things about the movement during that period of time. Ruth's father was a Methodist minister who actually planted churches around Alabama. So they weren't rich. Right. But they lived comfortably. And her father, of course, would try to protect the children by telling them, don't get involved in this, you need to stay inside and all this kind of stuff. But they were determined to become involved so they would sneak out the window and go participate in the marches and things of that nature. But one particular march that was taking place, Ruth's brother actually and a group of other Black men were arrested. And after they were arrested, they started hearing the women that were also arrested during the demonstration begin to scream and holler that the police officers were attempting to rape them. So they were trying to figure out how can we help these women in this particular situation. And so they thought about it for a minute. They looked at the toilet and they pulled the toilet out of the floor and flooded the jail in order to stop the raping of those women. So they had to release them. They were beaten on their way out the door, but they had to release them in order to repair what was taking place in the jail cell.

Claude [00:26:03] Another interesting thing that that took place is during the marches, Ruth's home was one of the few homes that actually had a telephone. The news media would actually stop and use it. Of course, this is before wireless technology and all that. So they would actually use their home and get paid, not a whole lot, but just a donation to use their telephone to make calls back up north to get reports on what was taking place in the civil rights march or the marches that were taking place. After Ruth and I were married, one of her parents, I can't remember if it was a mother or father. But Ruth, one of the things her father did not believe in was women driving. And so Ruth actually could not drive. Okay. She didn't understand some of the things that drivers do. If you're on a road trip, if lights flash, that means that someone is trying to pass you so you got to move to the side. So on our way to Selma, we actually stopped in Montgomery to get gas, stopped, got gas, got back in the car and began to drive down [Route] 80 towards Selma. A car came up behind me, flashed their lights, and so I knew to move over. And as I began to move over, Ruth started screaming. She actually grabbed the steering wheel, almost killed us to be quite honest with you. And she started hollering at me, What are you doing? What are you doing? Don't stop. Don't stop, Don't stop. I said, Ruth, let the steering wheel go, you're going to kill us. I finally pulled over quickly enough to the side. The car went around me and I said, What is that about? You can't grab a steering wheel like that when we're driving. And she said, I had a flash back. She sad, when we were kids we would hear stories about the Klan driving up behind you. Some family in cars, flashing their lights, pretending they're the police when they actually were Klansmen and they would pull you out of the car and beat you. And so she thought that's what was about to happen. And, of course, she didn't know but I was not traveling alone with just her and the kids. I had something to deal with the situation if it was going to turn into something like that under my seat.

But, fortunately, I've never had to worry about anything like that. But it was amazing to hear her talk about some of the stories and some of the things that they had to deal with even as it pertains to voting. Because even in Alabama, with so many Black people still in this state and it's still a red state. The things I still don't understand as to why. Well, she posed this question to me. Let me put it this way. Do you have any idea why Bull Connor, George Wallace still got elected after we got the right to vote. And I said, you know, Ruth, I never thought about it. And she said, because there would be surrogates that would come into our communities. And when I think about [member of Congress from South Carolina] Tim Scott and I think about [Supreme Court Justice] Clarence Thomas and some of those that are so averse to the things that we believe in. There would be Black surrogates that would come into our communities with truckloads of groceries and they would hand them out to those in the community and they'd say things like, you see, George Wallace is not so bad at all. Look at what he's doing. This is during the time when voting was taking place, pickup trucks of groceries and dropping them off at homes. This is what Governor Wallace has done for you. This is what Bull Connor has done for you. And I was just amazed at that. But what that tells me is that from that that type of thinking is why we have the Tim Scott's of the world, the Clarence Thomas's of the world today because there are those that are thinking more about themselves because those that were passing out those groceries were probably getting paid a good little bit in order to influence those in the community against voting against them. But anyway, I just thought I would throw that in. This is history.

Jeff [00:31:12] This is terrific. Such a contrast growing up, as you said, in your sort of closed community in Houston to her environment in Selma and how different that experience influenced both of you.

Claude [00:31:28] Right. Right. I've said for some time now that really I am one and I've always had friends of different colors and things of that nature. But really, our communities were destroyed, our businesses were destroyed after we began to really become more integrated in Harris County and in Houston, which I think is good for society that it changed. But certainly the economics for our communities changed after things became more integrated.

Jeff [00:32:14] Yes.

Debbie [00:32:14] When you went to high school were they segregated schools?

Claude [00:32:18] Yes, they were. Kashmere, I graduated from a new school. I'll give you a little bit more history about me. I graduated from Kashmere High School, but a new school was built called Francis Scott Key. Okay. The idea was for Kashmere High School to remain and keep that name and we were going to go to Francis Scott Key and some of us thought, hell, I don't want to graduate from Francis Scott Key, went to Kashmere all of our lives and everything, you know.

Claude [00:33:02] And so my first involvement in understanding the political process and how mobilization can get things changed was when we found out that that that name change was going to take place in this new school. And the new school was beautiful. And it was supposed to have been a school where white students and white teachers were supposed to come to. And we got white teachers, but we never got white students. We never got white students. And the white teachers were great. I mean, we really enjoyed them, had great relationships with some of them. But we never got white students. But getting back to the name change and so and so, me and a couple of my friends said we do not want to graduate from Francis Scott Key. We want to graduate from Kashmere. We've been there for six years. And so we actually got petitions signed in the neighborhood, took them to the school board, presented them, and they changed their minds and named the old building we were leaving Francis Scott Key and the new school kept the name Kashmere High School.

Jeff [00:34:19] Interesting. So Francis Scott Key, the author of The Star-Spangled Banner and ironically the third verse talks about hunting down slaves. Did you know that at the time? No, you just wanted to keep the name Kashmere.

Claude [00:34:37] Right. I did find that out later.

Jeff [00:34:39] Okay. All right. Very interesting. So you're at Tuskegee. You meet Ruth. How do you wind up back in Houston again?

Claude[00:34:49] Well, believe it or not, my dad was on strike. I had actually mentioned to my father that I wanted to go to summer school. I was going to school to be an engineer and decided that I just didn't like all that damn math and stuff that you had to learn in order to become an engineer. And at Kashmere I had a government teacher say to me after watching me give a presentation on some case, I don't even know what the case was now, she said, If you don't go to school to be an attorney, you'll regret it the rest of your life. I've regretted it the rest of my life. I have.

Jeff [00:35:40] We don't.

Claude[00:35:40] Yeah, but I do. Anyway, I told my dad I want to change my major. I've decided I want to change my major and do something different. And he said, Well, I don't know if I'll be able to send you to summer school because we're planning to strike against AT&T. I can't remember now if it was [19]71 or [19]72 but they were actually going on strike to win the right to not have to pay for their health care. Now think about that a minute. They were actually paying premiums for health care and they won that strike. They won it. And one of the saddest things that has happened to me since I have been an officer in this union is giving up that right again and have our members have to pay for their health care costs.

Claude [00:36:54] I made sure that my local voted it down and I talked to our members. The contract passed, unfortunately. But it did not pass in Houston because I said I could not live with myself. And my dad is probably turning over in his grave knowing as an officer of this union what he went on strike for. Because I went on strike, it killed my college career. I actually started working at grocery stores and stuff and decided to hell with college. And during that time, Ruth and I got closer. She got pregnant and we married and we've been together for 53 years now. One of the best things that ever happened to me in my life. But that deterred me from finishing [college] and started me on my career working, making a living for this baby.

Jeff [00:37:59] When do you wind up at the phone company?

Claude [00:38:04] I went to different jobs for years and I worked at grocery stores, started getting involved with labor unions at the grocery stores at that time, United Food and Commercial Workers. I think I was a member there for a short period of time. Then I got promoted to some position. I think I started out as a sacker, then I became a stocker. I didn't think I wanted to go to work where my dad worked. Actually [I] had been terminated from a job. I actually applied for a job at AT&T. Didn't hear anything from them. I got into some type of dispute with my manager. And again, I think it's because Ruth's second parent passed away and I ended up staying a couple of days later than I had thought I needed. Anyway, there was some miscommunication between me and management on how long I was going to be out, put it that way, and so I was terminated. Riding the bus back to my apartment, I passed by an AT&T building where the hiring took place. And it's almost like a voice from the sky said you need to stop and check on your application. I stopped and went in. This supervisor saw me. She had a stack of applications on her desk and she said, Claude, we were going to give you a call. Thank you so much for coming in and we're going

to hire you. I thought, now how could she have thought that she was just going to hire me? All these applications on her desk. The [AT&T/EEOC affirmative action] Consent Decree [1973] had just taken place. Right. She saw that I was Black. (laughs) Here comes one. Here's one we can hire.

Jeff [00:40:15] Right on time.

Claude [00:40:20] Right on time. And listen, that's just the truth. Because I was not going to stop. As a matter of fact, I was getting ready to volunteer to go into the army.

Jeff [00:40:30] Wow.

Claude [00:40:31] To take care of my children. I think by that time, I think we had two children.

Jeff [00:40:38] So what year was this?

Claude [00:40:40] This was 1973. 1973. AT&T was looking for Black people to hire into technical positions now, right, as well as move women from operator positions into technical positions. So all of that was taking place around that time.

Jeff [00:41:06] You say AT&T, but at the time it was Southwestern Bell.

Claude [00:41:10] It was Southwestern Bell at that time. Well, no, it was actually AT&T because I think after that the Bell system broke up after [19] 73. Yeah, it was actually AT&T during that period of time, if I remember correctly. And then it became Southwestern Bell. Okay. Have I got it backwards?

Jeff [00:41:33] Well, I think the breakup of the Bells was in the [19]80s. What year was it?

Debbie [00:41:38] 1984.

Jeff [00:41:40] [19]84 was when AT&T was broken up into the Baby Bells.

Jeff [00:41:43] Well, it might have been Southwestern Bell.

Claude [00:41:45] I'm sure it was Southwestern Bell at that time, a subsidiary of AT&T. that's what it was, right. As a matter of fact, I might have had something to show you guys. Here we go. Can it be paused?

Jeff [00:42:04] Of course. [pause in tape while Claude searches for document]

Claude [00:42:11] [Claude shows the document] That's my father's first perfect attendance award. He received a pin for perfect attendance.

Jeff [00:42:19] Wow. It says Southwestern Bell Telephone Company.

Claude [00:42:22] So it was Southwestern Bell.

Jeff [00:42:25] Perfect attendance. Claude Cummings. It had his name engraved on it even. Wow. What a great keepsake. Now, does Claude the Third get that pin?

Claude[00:42:37] He probably will. I don't know if he'll want it. He'll probably trash it. (laughs)

Jeff [00:42:42] No, he won't.

Claude [00:42:43] And this is a Western Electric contract book, installation division from 1947 to 1949. I guess he just had that. But I thought I would share that with you also.

Jeff [00:42:56] Look at that. About 30 pages compared to our contract.

Claude [00:43:01] Yeah.

Jeff [00:43:05] Okay. So you wind up you're now at the phone company. What job are you hired into at the phone company?

Claude [00:43:15] I got hired as a frame attendant, 1973, frame attendant. My very first day on the job, I had a job steward walk in and say to me this is what you need to do if you want to make sure that you continue to stay employed. You need to sign a union card. Of course, I was able to tell him that my dad is a union member. So I knew to do that. I was just waiting for someone to approach me. The other interesting thing is the technicians that were there at that time did nothing to help me, absolutely nothing. What they said to me is you'll have a partner coming soon. And I said, okay. And so there was a block that was set up on the frame. I just spent my days soldering wires on that block and no interaction and nothing, nothing like that.

Jeff [00:44:22] So it was this resentment because of the consent decree or what? Or just racism?

Claude [00:44:29] Just flat racism. Just simple as that. Simple as that. They told me I had a partner coming, and sure enough, a week later, a Black female showed up, and she was my partner. Sharon Hudson is her name. Sharon and I are still friends today. We often laugh about those days. And I loved it because, man, she was beautiful. Yeah, she was absolutely beautiful. So I had fun. Yeah. We were just friends, just for the record. Just for the record, we were just friends. But I didn't mind coming to work. And the next thing is, we worked their asses in the ground. Boy, the two of us run some jumpers and we actually got a lot of overtime. Sharon and I did because we got to know the frame so well and we worked so hard because we had to prove ourselves, right. We had to prove that we could actually do the work.

Claude [00:45:36] So this steward that comes around -- You do a lot of pausing around here for that (siren sounds).

Jeff [00:46:03] Okay. That faded out. Okay. So this steward approaches you about signing a membership card. Assume white, male?

Claude [00:46:15] White, male.

Claude [00:46:19] Is he part of the group that turns his back on you at that point?

Claude [00:46:21] No, he didn't actually work on that floor. He worked in the building. It was a toll building. So I worked at the Jefferson toll building in downtown Houston. So that was, you need to sign a union card.

Jeff [00:46:34] Were you able to break down this barrier with your white coworkers?

Claude [00:46:38] You know, after a while things got better. Let me just put it that way. And I think, again, it's because of our work ethic. You never know what people believe and what they think and what they hear. Right. I mean, during that period of time, I'm sure there were many who

thought we got these Black workers, they're not going to know how to do this work. They're going to slow us down. They're not going to properly be able to grasp what takes place here. And we were able to show them differently. Right. I mean, just like my dad was able to show those that had questions about their ability to be able to do things. Because there were questions about can Black people actually do this work? Are they taking our jobs? Those kind of things, right. They took place even then, just like some of the crap that you hear Trump talk about now.

Jeff [00:47:35] Immigrants are going to take the Black jobs.

Claude [00:47:36] Gonna take Black jobs. Gonna take Black jobs.

Jeff [00:47:38] He's so tone deaf. It's just incredible.

Claude [00:47:41] Yeah. My Black job is to make sure his ass don't get back in the White House again. That's my Black jobs. (laughs)

Jeff [00:47:48] That's good. That's good. That's good.

Claude [00:47:53] And I'm doing everything I can to bring that Black jobbers on with meto make sure it gets done.

Claude [00:48:00] So I think that's it. Because we were the only two. But you find out in life that after people sit down and actually talk with each other about things, our lives are not that different. We have children. We have families. We have loved ones. We have everyday issues in life that we have to deal with. Our principles, for the most part, are the same. You begin to blend. What I've said time and time again is more people need to get in a room and just talk to each other about things that go on in their lives and they'll find out that they have so much in common if you just get past the color of your skin.

Jeff [00:48:56] So you're working on the frame?

Claude [00:48:59] Yes.

Jeff [00:49:00] At some point, what's the genesis of your union involvement? What's the spark there?

Claude [00:49:07] So interesting. After some years of working on the frame and then actually moving into a communications technician position, I had a couple of people reach out to me about becoming more involved and going to union meetings. I'll be honest with you, there was a lot of job growth during that period of time in the city and AT&T was beginning to expand. So I was working a lot of overtime. I could care less about being -- I was enjoying the money to be quite honest with you. And also enjoying going to happy hour because there was a club right down the street from where the building was so I could care less. The union hall was on one side of the Jefferson toll building, the nightclub that I enjoyed going to was on the other side of the building. And there were times when I would say to myself, I don't know if I want to go to a union meeting or I want to go to the bar because sometimes union meetings weren't all that great. Right. But I started attending and -

Jeff [00:50:26] Who was the local president at the time?

Claude [00:50:27] The local president at that time was M.E. Nichols.

Jeff [00:50:31] Okay.

Claude [00:50:32] M.E. Nichols was the president. It might have been, let me see. It might have been Tommy Parsons. Now that I think about it when I first started it was probably Tommy Parsons.

Jeff [00:50:46] Some very famous names came out of that local.

Claude [00:50:48] Yes, very famous.

Jeff [00:50:50] Parsons, Joe Gunn, M.E. Nichols.

Claude [00:50:52] I'm going to tell you a Joe Gunn story that is going to blow your mind.

Jeff [00:50:55] Okay. All right.

Claude [00:50:57] Trust me. It's going to blow your mind.

Jeff [00:50:59] All right.

Claude [00:51:06] More and more Black people began to get hired on and some of us began to hear about these different committees, legislative committees and other committees. And so I decided to just start attending some meetings and we joined some committees. I found it to be quite interesting. But still nothing that whet my appetite enough to ever want to be a union leader because I'd hear in some of those meetings, some of the crap that was going on and the fights, screaming and hollering at the officers during officers meetings, and I don't want to be part of that shit. But there did become a time when people of color began to say, when are we going to be able to see someone sitting on that podium that looks like us. A young lady I got to know pretty well, her name was Valeria Simmons, from operator services, decided that she wanted to become more active and run for office. I would say that was probably the one person that started talking to me more about getting involved around the union and doing things. So we began to attend meetings. I think I was on the community services committee. I joined the legislative committee and so I began to get active there.

Claude [00:52:59] Then somewhere in that time frame and I should know this, but I don't. CWA minority caucus started to get formed, was beginning to make noise. Dennis Serrette and others began to talk about the need for there to be more involvement of people of color in CWA. And again, the time frame escapes me, but I know we have it in history somewhere. The Black leaders or Black activists, I guess, in CWA decided to form the CWA minority caucus. And that first meeting was held, if I remember correctly, in Detroit. In Detroit. Okay. Yeah.

Debbie [00:54:17] I'm guessing you're talking early -- were you hired on in [19]73?

Claude [00:54:22] Right. Right. So this had to be late[19]70s, late [19]70s, early [19]80s. But there was a call to action to bring Black leadership into Detroit just to talk about how do we move forward? How can we make sure that there is some Black representation on. And I'll look for it because I've got that history somewhere. To be honest with you, I've got it somewhere.

Jeff [00:54:55] That time frame seems about right, late [19]70s, early [19]80s.

Claude [00:55:01] The late [19]70s early [19]80s is when it took place in Detroit.

Jeff [00:55:07] So you go to this meeting in Detroit?

Claude [00:55:08] Yes, yes. When we heard about this meeting, we decided we wanted to attend. Some of us wanted to go and I've forgotten the committee that we were on at that time because it wasn't the Equity Committee, but it was some committee that dealt with the rights of people of color. I don't know, maybe it was just some group we started ourselves.

Jeff [00:55:34] It might have been folded into community services at the time.

Claude [00:55:36] Something like that. Yeah, right. But we approached the leadership about going. And it's: you really don't need to be going to a meeting like that. We don't need nothing like that here. Everybody's fine. We treat you all great. Yeah. The local officers, we treat you all great. Why you all want to go to something like that. And I said, Well, we'd like to go. So we actually began to mobilize and understood clearly that we had the right as members to get the membership to vote to support us. And so I mobilized some members and brought them down and we put a motion on the floor that the local fund some of us going to these meetings and that actually happened.

Jeff [00:56:35] And at the time, 6222 was a big local.

Claude [00:56:40] It's a big local, around 10,000 members. It was not that they couldn't afford it. They had the money, the resources.

Jeff [00:56:46] What's the racial makeup of it in this late [19]70s, early [19]80s time frame? I mean still predominantly white?

Claude [00:56:54] Still predominantly white. But I would say because we had so many Black operators and so many that were beginning to get into clerical type jobs, I would say a good maybe 30% of that membership. Especially because we had a huge operator services unit that was just full of Black women, to be quite honest with you.

Jeff [00:57:20] And what about Hispanic membership?

Jeff [00:57:22] Not as many Hispanic. Hispanic turnout began to increase in later years. But the Black membership was really expanding. Yeah, it was.

Jeff [00:57:39] Okay, so you get a taste --

Claude [00:57:41] Anyway, so I get a taste of this. Right. Get a taste of this. And so I began to get more active. I said this is good. This is really good. And during that period of time we decided that we were going to run Valeria for an office. And, of course, it was all kind of uproar about that. Oh my God. They're getting ready to run a Black person for an officer in this union. What the hell are we going to do? What's wrong with them? So each one of us would have little meetings with white leaders. Y'all don't need to do this. We're fine. We love you. We'll take care of you.

Jeff [00:58:22] Stay in your place.

Claude [00:58:23] Things are great. Stay in your place. Stay at your place. And there was a gentleman named Monarchie Clay. Listen. He was a great looking guy. Let me just put it that way, okay? He was a good looking guy. If I was going to remake myself one day, I probably say, man I'd like to look like that guy right there. Because he didn't have any problems getting dates or anything like that. I mean, he was just a great guy, great personality. But 6222 had a history that I learned about after I got active. Because remember now I said I was going to the clubs, but there were other Black people that were going to meetings. Whenever, especially a Black man, decided he was going to get active, the leadership would either work with management to promote you or to get you fired.

Jeff [00:59:39] Wow.

Claude [00:59:42] That's a fact. It's a fact. And so minorities started organizing and mobilizing Women were falling in love with him, both Black and white. And so he was really seen as a real threat because not only Black women liked this guy, but these white women liked him, too. And so they promoted Monarchie, got Monarchie promoted, convinced him he couldn't win. And he took a management position and he's still living today. Matter of fact, we live almost in the same communities and we talk about those days. I'll be honest with you. What he says to me is, Claude, I'm glad you hung in there.

Jeff [01:00:32] Yes.

Claude [01:00:35] And so he got promoted. They tried to promote Valeria. Valeria would not get promoted. She was smart enough to be careful not to get fired. Right. So Joe Gunn, who at that time had left 6222. Joe Gunn, in my opinion, was a guy who could strategize against AT&T better than any leader that I'd ever experienced during that period of time. He would actually put videos up against the AT&T building. I mean, a movie camera and just, Ma Bell sucks and that kind of stuff. Ma Bell is a bad mama, that kind of stuff. Just absolutely aggravate AT&T. He was just brilliant when it comes to some of the tactics that he would use to piss them off. He and M.E. Nichols. M.E. Nichols got me clearly to understand the importance of having political power. [

Claude [01:01:40] Getting back to Valeria. After it was apparent that everyone could see that we had mobilized enough members to talk about making a difference and needing to make a difference. Joe Gunn was called in from his position as president of the Texas AFL-CIO, that's what he had ascended to at that period of time. He actually came to the membership meeting and made a motion. He nominated her for the position and talked about that it's time for there to be some difference in the way that the leadership of the union looks like. And she actually won. Yeah, she won. So she was the first Black elected member of local 6222.

Jeff [01:02:41] She broke the glass ceiling.

Claude [01:02:43] She broke the glass ceiling. Yeah. Yeah.

Jeff [01:02:46] Good for her. Is she still with us?

Claude [01:02:49] No, she's not. She passed away. And unfortunately made some errors. One of the things that she did, you wonder sometimes. One of the things I've always tried to do is listen to advice and ask for advice and. I'm not afraid to let people know what I know and what I don't know. I would say to all of you. That's probably one of the things I think the staff here, directors, like about me. If there's something I just don't know. I just tell them I don't know. I don't try to make up stuff. I am who I am and I need you all's help in doing whatever it is they want me to do that I don't know. (laughs) And they've been great in giving me what I need. Right. And I think they are appreciative of that and appreciative of the way that I help them in what they do. But anyway, one of the things that she did was bought a Jaguar during the downturn in the U.S. economy with cars. I begged her not to do that. I said, whatever you do, please don't buy a Jaguar. I understand you like a Jaguar. But the US. auto industry is struggling. You can't pull a nonunion car up to the union hall as an officer. You can't do that. She did it. She paid a price for it. Because she was one term. Yeah.

Jeff [01:04:50] So when do you first get elected?

Claude [01:04:56] So that happens and I'm pretty distraught after that because I thought Valeria represented the members well. There was some things that she should have done differently. That

was one of them. Right. And so anyway, that happens and life goes on. And I think it's during the election that she lost that we elected some new officers and I think it was our first or second Hispanic officer in the local. I'd become pretty active during that period of time with the legislative committee and gotten to know politicians. And so I begin to have an appetite for possibly running for a position, especially after Valeria lost. Because I thought to myself, we're going to have a Black person run the first and then they fail, only one term. I said that's not representation of what I believe Black people can do or a Black person could do if they get elected to this office. But they just have to act differently. One of the things that that I learned early in life, and I did this even when I was elected president of my class, I understood clearly. I worked for the class. The class didn't work for me. Yeah. Okay. I work for the class, and that's what my entire career has been about. I work for the members. The members don't work for me. I understand we're going to have differences and things of that nature sometimes. But it is my job to work for them in any way that I could.

Claude [01:06:51] And so I began to get an appetite about possibly running for an office. After Callaway got elected and this young Hispanic guy, Robert Fuentes, got elected and some others, I thought to myself. Those guys, people like them, they really moved out a bunch of old officers that were there. And I said, they'll probably be there for a while. I said there's no way that I'm going to be able to run anytime soon. So life continues. And then CWA develops the Committee on Equity and there's some other things that take place. And I be damned if not the same issue that we had, and I don't know if it was under Nick, Joe Gunn, or I think it might have been Tommy [Parsons], I can't remember with the event in Detroit that they didn't want to pay us to go to. Callaway says we don't need equity committees. We don't need that. Why want to go to that stuff. We're fine. Everything's great here. And so Callaway.

Jeff [01:08:12] Callaway is white.

Claude [01:08:16] Yeah, they're white. Callaway is well liked, tall, nice-looking guy and everything. I met with him rather than start something up on the floor. I said, what is wrong with you guys? I said, we're just going to get better educated. It's obvious that there needs to be a change not only here, but for our union to come up with a program like this. Evidently they see that something needs to be done to try to train people of color, how to lead in this union, and how to get better involved. More involved people are the better off we are. What is your problem with that? Well, we just don't think we need that here. It just starts problems. It starts separating people. That's not about separating people. I mean, there's a need. So anyway they decide they're not going to send anybody to be a part of, and I can't remember what type of meeting it was. It was a meeting to talk about the need to get more people of color involved. And so I mobilized a group and we got paid to attend.

Debbie [01:09:34] In an official committee of the national union?

Claude [01:09:40] Yes. The national union was having some type of event and might have been the first equity conference or something like that that was taking place. And the local would have to pay us to go and they just did not want us to go. But after they observed that they began to get concerned about me. And I need to say this that prior to that happening, I did run for an executive board. I ran for an executive board position. I think it was in the cycle before these guys won and lost. I lost by, I think there were two of us that were running for positions. And we had gotten pretty popular, to be quite honest with you, because we had gotten pretty active in the local, both of us. Why can't I think of his name? I'll think of it and give it to you all later. But I lost by 11 votes. I think somewhere between 7 and 11 votes. I think the other guy lost by like 20 votes. Very close. The election chair, when he announced the results, resigned immediately. He said, I'll never hold

another election again. I was told we didn't lose those elections, but there were ballots that were disqualified so we wouldn't win. And he was honorable enough. They weren't going to let him change anything. But he resigned and I never saw him again. I never saw him again.

Jeff [01:11:39] So how were the elections conducted?

Claude [01:11:42] By mail ballot, by mail ballot.

Claude [01:11:46] And so that took place and now let me move forward. So we have this position now where we get the votes we needed in order to go to this event. We come back and then we just start getting more active in the local. Callaway had been elected maybe three or four or five months when we had that happen. And then I'm working on the 13th floor of the building in downtown Houston. Again, the union hall was right across the street. One other part, I need to set this history up correctly. We had three secretaries that worked at our union hall. Marianna was one of them. When my dad was working for the company, Marianna at that time was a teenager that sold additional life insurance to members that might want it that the union was sponsoring. And so she would handle my dad whenever my dad would come to handle business my dad would pay her. All right. So move forward all these years. Marianna is still there, but now she's a secretary. I think she was just a clerk or something, some title, but I'm not sure that she was a permanent employee of the union. But she's a permanent employee now. So I worked on the 13th floor of the toll building and I look outside and three of the secretaries are outside eating lunch. I don't think much about it. Marianna was Italian, the other two ladies were white. I thought to myself, they are getting a tan, right? And so that day passed. The next day I look out the window there. They're outside. And I said it's strange eating outside. But it was either the third or fourth day, something strange happened. I looked out, it was raining and they were outside eating under umbrellas. And I said, something is strange here. So I took a break, went over and talked, I said, Marianna, why are you guys out here eating lunch in the rain? She said, Claude, you know those new officers, Callaway and the others you all elected? Yeah. They directed us to take our breaks and lunches in the women's restrooms. And I said, What? Now, mind you, we have two buildings. 6222 was well-funded, a lot of money. We had a two-story building on the front and a two-story meeting hall with a restaurant at the bottom. We were told that we can't have our breaks or our lunches in the restaurant and we can't have them in the office building with the men. We have to take our breaks and our lunches in the women's restroom.

Claude [01:14:21] I said, You guys are lying. They said, no. I said, one other thing. You see that they put a wall up in front of the building, a wall inside. At one time was an open space, but they actually put a wall that we couldn't get to the secretaries. Marianna was beautiful and she was a great dancer. She hung out with a lot of Black people. So anyway, I said, okay. I said, you all take me in. She said, Claude, we can't take you in, she said, because they'll fire us. You know, we can't do that. So we need you to come back tonight and we'll show you. So I actually drove back that night and went in and I actually observed a table. You can imagine, the bathroom was about maybe the size of that door to the very, very end of this wall. At the corner you had the stalls, three stalls, and you had a table with salt and pepper on it and napkins. And they were told that's where they had to take their breaks and lunches. And then I saw this wall. I said, why have they got this wall separating? They said, well, that's to keep the niggers from Marianna because Mariana would go out with Black men and they would come and see her. That's exactly what they said. And so I said, well, this is pretty damn shocking. I said, well, who's standing up for y'all? You know whose doing it? Nobody, [they] said. Claude, they're terrified. Everybody. We're scared. We're scared for our jobs if we speak out. Our own union, because they OPEIU, our own union is even afraid to speak out. And I said, well, somebody has got to speak out for you guys.

Claude [01:16:57] And again, I would go to union meetings, but I didn't know anything about Robert's Rules of Order. I didn't know anything about how meetings are handled. I just go and listen. Half the time, we'd had a few drinks before, so shit, I was just there so I could sign my name and say I was there and gone. So anyway, I said, well, this is not right. And they said, Claude, but people are afraid. And so I said, well, I'm not afraid. And so the next membership meeting, meeting packed about 400 people. We had large union meetings 4 or 500 people in that building. I'm scared to death. They open up the meeting like they normally -- I hope I'm not taking too long. If I am, you all.

Jeff [01:17:48] No. These are great. Yeah. Keep going.

Claude [01:17:52] They open up the meeting and the prayer and Pledge of Allegiance and I jump up to the mic, said, listen, I need to talk about something. Member Cummings, you just can't jump up to the mic. We have rules, we got reports and stuff. So I said, let's back down. I said, okay. I think Carraway started talking about something and I jumped up to the mic again. Said listen I've got something I need to talk about. And people start laughing. And Carraway said, member Cummings, what's your name? I said, my name [is] Claude Cummings. You need to sit down. And I said, well, I've got something I need to talk about. Well you need to sit down. So one of the officers gave a report. It might have been Weldon Betts. I don't know if you remember Weldon Betts. You remember Weldon?

Jeff [01:18:41] I do.

Claude [01:18:43] I can't remember who it was, but he gave a report and I jumped up at the mic again and I said, listen. I've got something I need to talk about here. And they said, well Mr. Cummings, Member Cummings we have Robert Rules here. You just can't do this. I said, Well, where Mr. Rules at? I'll talk to him, who knew Robert Rules knew that about me. (all laugh) I said, where's Mr. Rules, I'll talk to him about it. It's embarrassing now. I've had some people say, Claude, I can't believe you even say that publicly. I said, I just tell the truth. And so I had a Black woman grab me and pulled me to the side and set me down and said, what in the hell are you trying to do? And I explained it to her and she said, you need to get up, wait until new business, get up on new business, make a motion that secretaries that work for the union should not be treated in -- well, just make a motion that women secretaries should have a right to take their breaks at lunch as everybody else does. And then you tell them that the women that work for the union shouldn't be treated worse than our members who work for AT&T. That's what you say when they actually make out. And so I did that. Got a standing ovation. Okay. A standing ovation.

Jeff [01:20:00] I'm guessing the buildup helped.

Claude [01:20:09] Yes. Because they want to do it right. This is going to be good. Whatever it is, it's going to be something. I got a standing ovation. I was nervous. I was so scared. I said, I'm getting my ass out of here and go and get a drink down on the other side of the club just as quick as I can. And on my way, a beeline to the door, a group of members grabbed me. This is what I'm fixing to say here. Think about it, and I almost tear up every time I think about it. They took me to the back of the hall. They said, a leader is born.

Jeff [01:20:50] How cool is that.

Claude [01:20:52] They said, we're running you for the next position. We're going to run you for an office. They ran me for an office. And I've been elected ever since.

Jeff [01:21:00] What was the first office you were elected to?

Claude [01:21:02] Vice-President.

Jeff [01:21:04] Vice-president. Yes.

Claude [01:21:06] They ran me in 1986. And they ran me too. When I say they ran me, they ran. Then I heard afterwards, Claude, this guy has been harmed, the way they talk to people, the way they treat the members. Half the time they [unintelligible]. One of them pulled a boat up every Friday to the union hall with the union vehicle hooked to it and let go. They locked the hall down and just have parties and games. Half the time you couldn't get them to return the damn phone calls. As a matter of fact, the guy, Robert, that I ran against and beat, the young Hispanic guy that I helped and actually gave money to, after he got elected, he told me, I can't talk to you anymore. I'm a vice-president. I'm a vice-president now. I can't talk to you anymore. I started calling him about some members that were having issues. I ran and B.J. ran, B.J. beat Callaway.

Jeff [01:22:13] Okay.

Claude [01:22:14] And beat this guy. That's how we go elected. That was the team.

Claude [01:22:21] Etzel. And we turned that local around. We did a lot of good stuff, B.J. [Etzel] and I.

Jeff [01:22:38] Just as an observer during that time, 6222 had this huge profile for a long time. M.E. Nichols, Joe Gunn, even Parsons days and then vanished. And then I never heard anything about it again until you guys.

Claude [01:22:56] Because of that membership. Because of that attitude of those guys. Those guys were there to do nothing but party and have a good time.

Jeff [01:23:03] Yes.

Claude [01:23:04] And doing nothing to represent themembers. The members were treated horribly.

Jeff [01:23:08] Yes.

Claude [01:23:09] And B.J. and I and some others, we turned it around. Company started bringing jobs in and financially we were off well. I hated for B.J. BJ. tried to move us from downtown. He never could get that done. I told him. B.J., don't worry about that. I'll make sure we get a building built. But before I ran, they started courting me, Callaway did. They wanted to make me, like, an unpaid assistant to the president and all that kind of stuff.

Jeff [01:23:44] They knew a leader was born, too.

Claude [01:23:45] So anyway I was elected and served for 12 years. I think I've always had an opponent, but I've never lost.

Jeff [01:24:01] So you served for 12 years as vice-president?

Claude [01:24:03] Twelve years as vice-president. And then in 1999 I was elected president.

Jeff [01:24:13] Okay.

Claude [01:214:49] I was elected president and I served for 12 years as president. Built a new building in downtown Houston. Beautiful building. B.J. wanted to move us away from downtown because the taxes and everything was so high. And the members tried twice. He tried twice and I tried to help him do it, but he just couldn't get it done. And I finally told him, B.J., I'll get it done. Don't worry about it. And you'll be the first to know about it once I get it done. And so interesting story about that. My first speech, I told the members, we got it. This building is full of mold, they're old, we've got to build a building. You all don't want to go from downtown. Fine. But we've got to build a building. So they say, well Claude, build it on this lot. And I said, that's fine because we had a whole block in downtown Houston. So I said, that's great. That's fine as long as y'all give me the okay to do it because we've got to do it. And so we had a groundbreaking ceremony and mayor came, others came, big, big deal. The next day, I get a call from Saint Joseph's Hospital, right across the street from us. They said, Mr. Cummings, we saw that you all had a groundbreaking ceremony over there. We really were thinking about approaching you all about the possibility of some partnership or doing something with you all. And I said, listen, you all go to hell. I said, I've been trying to build a building for seven years and we finally got these members agree to something. I'm not going to delay nothing. We've had groundbreaking. Good-bye. Thank you for calling. Hung up. went to sleep that night. My dad came to me in sleep. Said, what is wrong with you? What is wrong with you? I've always told you to sit down and talk with me.

Jeff [01:26:21] Your dad had already passed?

Claude [01:26:22] My dad was dead. Yeah. He'd passed away. You don't treat people like that. You need to talk with those people. Next day I got up, shook my head, I said what the hell was that about? But I called him. I said, listen, I apologize. I said, why don't you all come over and talk with me? And so they did and they said, Mr. Cummings, we have a lot right down the street. What we'd like to do is just swap lots with you. Just swap lots. They said, Yeah. Same size as your lot and everything. I said, No, but there's a difference. Difference? I said. This lot [is] right across from the hospital where you guys are. Right behind me is the Toyota Center where the Rockets play. My lot is more valuable than that one [which] is nothing but just a lot next to nothing but another freeway. And they said, you're right. And so we swapped lots and I got \$1.5 million cash on top of that. All right. Swap lots. We start to build. Sit down with the Building Trades. Tell them we're building this building. Y'all need to make sure it's union labor. You need to make sure it is. I don't want no problems with this. All right. Get the building. Building gets started. Only to find out after the iron has gone up, that it is not US Steel. That is a problem and they are not using unionized steelworkers.

Jeff [01:28:07] Ironworkers.

Claude [01:28:08] Ironworkers. Couldn't believe it. And so they bid the job out. And to this day, I don't understand that because the Building Trades, I brought them in with the architect. And so to this day, I still don't know how they got so sideways. As a matter of fact, I even went to a meeting and apologized to them and they said, Claude, we know it's not your fault because you had a Building Trades guy there. It's his fault. But thank you for coming over. But to make a long story short. I needed \$1 million in order to finish paying for the building. (laughs) So I had that extra million there and then I end up having to still borrow money from the [national] union. We had plenty of money. Shouldn't have had to borrow anything for that building.

Claude [01:28:59] And then others would also complain about the fact that why is he building that big tall building. Business headquarters is not as big as that building he's building. And I said, well, it's not about now. It's about the future. It's a beautiful building in downtown Houston. It's a church

now, because after I left and got elected the vice-president of the district, I sold the building. I built it for 2.1 million. They sold it for 9 million.

Jeff [01:29:34] Wow. It was a beautiful building.

Claude [01:29:37] Beautiful building. It sold for 9 million. So they paid HQ off. Because we began to lose jobs because of technology, too. So the income was running short, was running low, I should say. And then they bought a building outside of the downtown like they always wanted and they were able to pay cash for it. They paid cash for it so that local is debt-free. They'll have money for years to come.

Jeff [01:30:01] Pretty good investment.

Jeff [01:30:03] It was a pretty good investment. To be honest, that's a pretty good investment. So that's that part. And then, of course, Mr. [Andy] Milburn decides he's not going to run for office again. I was getting ready to retire because my wife had opened a print shop and everything. I couldn't get the CWA book [printed there] because everybody thought I was going to use that to my advantage to make politicians use her instead of other printers. Because the relationship had become so bad in our district between CWA and AT&T, members from across the district started asking me Claude, instead of retiring would you consider running for district vice-president? I served 12 years as president, 12 years as vice-president, 12 years as president. 24 years. I think I was the longest serving officer there. I think Barbara [Easterling] the secretary-treasury was the longest serving, but I was the second longest serving officer there.

Jeff [01:31:24] Longest serving president.

Claude [01:31:26] Sure. One day at a retiree's meeting when I was talking to the retirees about running and the announcement went out and everything, Joe Gunn showed up and I said, man, this is great. I get Joe Gunn because, remember, I'm the first Black male in this position. First Black male vice-president, first Black president and now I'm talking about running for vice-president of District Six. And I said, Joe Gunn showed up for this. This is absolutely great. Man I got this thing in the bag, Right. And he shows up. I've got about 75 to 80 retirees there and others and I see him and I see the look on his face like he's upset, angry about something. So I'm trying to figure out what's going on. And he pointed at me and said, you talking about running for office. If you run, it'd be the worst thing that ever happened to this union. The worst thing that could ever happen to this union. It broke my heart. I've never in my life had a white man make me cry. But I was about to cry because I worshiped the ground that Joe Gunn walked on because I thought he was such a great leader. And he said that to me in front of all those people. And it was because there were so many in that local, even when I ran for president, who said, Claude, you've done a great job as vice-president of 6222. You don't need to run for president. You just continue to work your ass off in that position. You don't need to be the leader. And this is people who I helped their kids, their grandkids, and others get hired because I worked to have such a great relationship with management. I could get just about anything I wanted out of management, to be quite honest with you. Even after I became the District Six vice-president. But I was never encouraged to run for higher office because everyone always thought I needed to stay where I was.

Jeff [01:33:43] Once again, to stay at your place.

Claude [01:33:44] Absolutely. You need to stay in your place. You don't need to do that. And so that was heartbreaking.

Jeff [01:33:52] It had to be disheartening for sure.

Claude [01:33:55] And after I won, he could never even look me in my face. I remember right now being in Austin at an event just shortly before he died. I just passed by him and I just looked because he just looked like a shell of his former self. I thought to myself, because there were members that actually, in 6222, we have all the pictures of presidents. There were retirees and others that wanted to pull his picture off the wall and take it outside, burn it with him there. This is how angry they were that he would come down and say something like that. And, of course, I ran and won. That was 2011. Served 12 years. Amazing. 12 years.

Jeff [01:35:27] So, there's some biblical connotations to that. I mean 12 years. It's remarkable. What a career. So you served as District Six vice-president for 12 years.

Claude [01:35:44] Bargained some pretty good contracts there. I would say the last contract I bargained was the most unique in that we've got a provision on health care there. I don't know that you even know this, that no other contract in this country has. And it was a contract that we extended. Remember, I don't know if you heard this, but it was when I ran. I made it an extension instead of allowing the members to vote and because [then AT&T CEO] Randall Stephenson was leaving. Okay. [John] Stankey was coming into office [in 2020] and he made it clear, based on what he had heard about it, that it would be dead on arrival if it was still pending while it was there. And so I talked [then CWA president] Chris [Shelton] in allowing me to just make it an extension. A couple of things that were unique about it is that on top of the provisions for VSP [voluntary severance payment], I was able to get an addition that was not in the agreement, but we signed an outside agreement, to give those who wanted to retire an additional \$50,000 in order to retire.

Jeff [01:37:11] Say what VSP is.

Claude [01:37:182] Voluntary severance payment. Okay. And also any member under that contract that retires, stayed on active health care benefits through the life of that agreement.

Jeff [01:37:29] Wow.

Claude [01:3730] Okay. That agreement is still in effect. So, normally you retire. You stay on active benefits until the next enrollment period. Right. Then you go on retiree benefits. Right. But in this particular contract, if you retire, you stayed on active health care benefits. No other contract has [this]. Okay.

Jeff [01:37:52] And when does that extension expire?

Claude [01:37:54] Expires next year. Next year.

Jeff [01:37:56] So you got your work cut out for you.

Claude [01:37:58] Well, Derek [Osobase], District Six vice-president at the time of the interview] does, I don't. (laughs)

Jeff [01:38:02] Somehow I got a feeling you'll get called into the game.

Claude [01:38:05] We'll figure it out. But I thought we bargained some great contracts there. I'm surprised that we've had this this strike because that's the last thing I'd expect to have a strike being the first president that actually worked for AT&T in over 25 years.

Jeff [01:38:31] And this is in the southeastern Bell region.

Claude [01:38:33] The southeast right. But District Nine just turned down their TA [tentative agreement]. So we've got some fights ahead. But I think we'll get there. Yeah, I do. But it's been interesting. [At the time of the interview, CWA in District 3 was on strike against AT&T Southeast and District Nine had just voted to reject the tentative agreement between CWA District 9 and AT&T in California and Nevada.]

Claude [01:38:49] My idea, even with this event, that is going to take place. [The evening after the interview CWA hosted a reception for the Congressional Black Caucus.] I had reservations about having this and we have those workers out on strike, but it still helps me build capacity. [House minority leader Hakeem] Jeffries a couple of days ago said to one of the, I think it was the Machinists' lobbyists, that man, that new president from the CWA, he's really on fire. Because what I've tried to do when it comes to meetings with the White House, when it comes to meetings with cabinet members, is meet with them myself, not send a surrogate, but to meet with them myself on issues that are important because, and this is no complaint of Chris [Shelton] at all. So no one takes it like that. But for whatever reason he would send a lot of surrogates. And so when you send surrogates, all you going to get are their surrogates. Right. And so I've kind of taken a different approach that I've been more hands-on when it comes to dealing with cabinet members and dealing with the White House and with others. And I think what that has done is raise the profile of CWA.

We're going to keep up the good fight. And that's why I'm continuing this [the reception for the Black Congressional Caucus the evening of the interview] because I want to thank those Congress members that have stood with us, but let them know that there's still a fight. And even if we end up with an agreement with the southeast [AT&T] contract, we've got the West now that has turned down that agreement. So we may need to put more pressure on AT&T.

Claude [01:41:59] So my idea of being successful is understanding clearly that no man is an island, no man stands alone. And this idea that CWA, as active as we are, and we are active, because every Congress member I've talked to, every senator that I've talked to has said to me, Claude, your workers do such a great job. And I've said to the workers, I've said to others, this is not about me. Even this event that we're having here, this is not about raising my profile. It's about raising the profile of CWA to a higher level to be able to get things done. And of course, I'm sure you all heard this. I've been so active talking about this [Biden] Administration and how positive they've been. The president invited me on Air Force One to fly with him to Detroit for a rally. I mean, that's how we've raised up the profile of CWA. Again, it's not about me. It's about the union. It's about the union. And what I want to do with this union is the same thing that Shawn Fain has done with the United Auto Workers. Right. I mean, he's united the country around issues that were important to them when they had their strikes going on. I don't particularly agree with some of the things that he says and he does. But let's face it. He's looked at as someone who's not afraid to speak out on issues that are important to his workers. And I want to be seen in the same vein.

Jeff [01:43:31] Just for a little context, you've referred three times to an event. Right here in the CWA building, you're going to have an event this evening.

Claude [01:43:38] Annually, the Congressional Black Caucus this time of year has a week-long conference. And last year, for the first time, CWA hosted a labor event just recognizing the Congressional Black Caucus and the work they've done, the support that they've given CWA on our initiatives, legislation that's important to us. It was very successful last year. And so we're having another one this year. This is probably going to be the last one that we are going to have because I have talked to the AFL-CIO and encouraged them to host this and just let individual unions contribute to make it a real labor event. I mean, we're having this event. SEIU is having an event. I think another union might be having an event somewhere. That doesn't make sense when all of us

can have one location, we can all have a real presence and show unity with the Congress members. This one is somewhat different because not only have we invited the Congressional Black Caucus, but also the Hispanic Caucus to participate with us because they have an event within, I think another week or so, they'll have their annual convention, a conference. So the idea, again, is to expand our territory, expand our capacity to get things done.

Jeff [01:45:15] Well, you've been very generous with your time. One of the things we like to do before we wrap up is Hannah is not a CWA person. She's our producer of these of these recordings. And she gets to listen to all this and then she comes up with questions that the rest of us that are in-house here might not have thought of. So Hannah, do you have a question?

Hannah [01:45:40] This is a more general question about your family and your legacy. It's really striking that your father was a member of the union, but it was essentially segregated at the time. And you, his son, have risen to become the president of the whole union. So I just want to ask, what does that mean to you?

Claude [01:46:01] It means so much and I often think what my dad would think about me now because I think initially he didn't know if I was going to make it. I'm serious. (laughs) In life. Period. He was very disappointed because I did not finish college. Very disappointed that I didn't. But I think that he would be proud of the fact that the union that he worked for as a janitor at one time. The idea that I now lead that union, I think he would be proud of that. I do. Yeah, I do. And I think about that often. I really do. I really do.

Hannah [01:46:48] Thank you.

Debbie [01:46:54] We went very quickly through your youth. And I think missed an opportunity so I want to ask this. I know how important your religion has been to the formation of your character, your values. I want to give you an opportunity to talk about that.

Claude [01:47:13] I'm strong in my faith. I am a deacon and my son is my pastor now. And so I'm happy about that. But I've always believed that you treat people the way that you want to be treated. And unlike some of this division that I see taking place now in this country, I've always reached out. And I think those that I work with on the job will tell you, even during those times when I was on that block by myself, I was always trying to engage in conversations with others because I believe in life that we're all equal. I just believe that. I understand clearly because of the way we've been raised, a lot of us, because of the gap in wages and that kind of stuff over the years and lifestyles that people have a tendency to just hold on to those things that they believe in and the way they were raised. But again, I've always thought that if we could just sit down and talk with each other, we found out so quickly that we have more things in common than we do differently. And I think my faith, what my faith has done, is helped me get through some pretty challenging times. My faith has gotten me through this strike. I was nervous about pulling 17,000 workers. That's the largest group of AT&T members that we have in this country right now. And to pull them out on a strike like this is just absolutely amazing. And as Jeff said a couple of minutes ago, I've been somewhat concerned, especially with some of the positions that the bargaining team has taken, on how we get them back.

Claude So I actually prayed a couple of nights ago. As a matter of fact, Nick [Hawkins] even said that to me, who was chairing the bargaining over there. Because I was at a point where I was actually thinking about pulling the trigger to bring them back in. I thought to myself, man, how do you bring them back in when you really don't have a win at the table to bring them back in on. And so I prayed. I said, well, God, I just need something to be able to -- And I have not called any former president or anything about this because I believe that there are times when you sit in that chair that there are things you got to do yourself to work out. Right. We couldn't get AT&T, and it

was so strange, couldn't get them to just do regular bargaining. Their idea of bargaining was here's the health care we want, and that's the health care wellness type plan that we're going to push on every district in this country. And I said to them, that district does not want that health care plan and that's not bargaining. And so as tough as the bargaining committee has been dealing with some of this stuff. I also feel like they were testing me just to see if I would fold. Because as much work I've done with AT&T, they understood clearly that I have not been as angry or as aggressive as maybe some of my peers have been when it comes to dealing with them. So I truly do believe that some of it was a test to just see what I would do. And I will tell you that the CEO is concerned. He's really concerned and they are all concerned about what could possibly take place with this storm. But I believe me holding strong on my faith because I was prepared to almost fold a couple a couple of days ago before this storm to bring them in. But after I had that prayer meeting, I decided that I'm not going to do it. And because I stayed firm in my belief that those workers need a win before they come in, this has happened. And now for the first time, we're actually getting them to do what they should have been doing a long time ago. And that's bargain. So I do believe some of it was a test of me and how they're going to have to deal with me.

Claude [01:52:16] They've come to me on some issues that are before the FCC with their First Net [public safety] program and I've helped with that. There was one other issue that escapes me right now that we helped with. So I have been a good partner. But they have not been a good partner with me. And I let the CEO know that I'm disappointed in this because this is the last thing I expected to have to do. But I've said this to other companies, and I said to AT&T, don't ever take my kindness for weakness because you don't stay in a position as long as I have, 38 years elected. I've never lost an officer election. I lost that one E-board election that I believe I never lost, to be quite honest with you. But I've never lost and it's because I know how to fight. And I'm not afraid to fight. Because again, it's about me representing these members, me working for these members. And that's why I travel like I do. That's why I go, like I do. Some of the staff say, Claude, man, I'm much younger than you. I don't see how you do this. Well, I just have this drive.

Claude [01:53:34] My mother. Speaking of that building. The last public appearance by my mother was in the new building that we built in downtown Houston. And had no idea that she had a tumor, it wasn't malignant. But for some reason or another, she just waited too long to do anything about it and then she became so ill and became so weak we did have the surgery. She did not survive the surgery. But as she began to get weaker, she would drive to church, I drove behind her once, going to church, she was all over the damn street. And when we got back home, I said, Mom, that's it. No more driving for you. But she would go to church every Sunday, speaking about faith. And then she started skipping Sundays. She'd call me because I would take her to church. She started skipping signs. Well, I don't think I'm going this Sunday. I don't feel like it, blah, blah, this and this. I decided to go over and have a conversation with her. Mom, What's going on because you normally go to church every Sunday. She said, let me just say this to you. When I was younger, I taught school, I taught Bible study. I did this at church, I sung in the choir, and I did all this. She said, you just remember this. Do what you can while you can, because there's going to become a time when you're not going to feel like doing what you used to do. And then there's going to be a time when you can't do anything. And about 4 or 5 months after that, she passed away. Those words that she mentioned have stuck with me and that's where I get my drive from, because I know that one day, everyone thinks they're going to live forever. You're not going to live ever. And there's going to be a time when you're not going to feel like doing some of this stuff, whether it's because of a physical ailment or you just don't feel like doing it. So if you want to leave an impact. I never want it to be said that I lived on this earth and all I did was suck up air, but I didn't do anything to try to help somebody.

Jeff [01:55:47] Yeah. I think you've made your mark.

Claude [01:55:49] And so that's what drives me. That's what drives me. I'm probably taking more time than what you all have.

Jeff [01:55:59] No. You've been more than generous with your time. Normally we do two hours you're coming up on 2.5 hours now. This is really generous of you to spend this time.

Claude [1:56:09] Well, I hope I gave you some good information.

Jeff [01:56:10] That's terrific. Some of these stories are just such a great snapshot of the progression of our history as a union and as a culture as well. So I really appreciate it. Is there something you would tell the next generation of workers in particular that they should be aware of or that they should be thinking about?

Claude [01:56:34] I was invited to speak at the Consumer Electronics Show in Vegas in January of this year. And, of course, everyone's talking about AI [artificial intelligence]. And day before I was in Seattle at the Microsoft complex. Of course, you know, we've got the contracts with ZeniMax and Activision and probably other workers we might be organized into Microsoft. I'm just amazed at the technology that has taken place and. And some of the people were just alarmed, some of the union officers there were alarmed at this technology and what it could possibly do to take their jobs. And I said, listen, I said even though technology has changed. We all need to remember that unions still stand for the things that they stood for years ago. And I said, how many of you remember beeper companies? And some of them laughed. And I said, listen, I organized the first beeper company at Southwestern Bell back in the[19] 80s. Said, but do you know that a couple of weeks ago I ran into an employee, because part of that was Southwestern Bell. And we had a provision in it that would allow those workers to go to AT&T if something happened to the beeper company. They're still working for the company. I said to her, what the hell are you doing? You can't find something in life other than work after all these years. But she's still working because we had provisions in that contract that gave her training and an opportunity to stay on the payroll and get trained for other jobs. So we all need to remember that even though the technology has changed, unions still stand for and still do the things that we were designed to do years ago. Job security, training, opportunities to move to different positions, to get training to do other things. So we need to look at how we can work with these companies to train those that are not going to be around for this new technology to get in other fields, to do other work, because there's still some work that's got to be done. Right. And so I would just say to other workers, get trained, but join a union. Help us pass the PRO Act that would make it much easier for workers to form a union and have worker **power** on the job and a voice. Right. And I think that's why so many young people are involved in unions. I think they saw what happened during the pandemic when workers were treated like crap during the pandemic and just said enough is enough. I think they're tired of all this damn corporate greed. When is enough money enough money? You look at Elon Musk and some of these others that have all his damn money. What does he say if workers go on strike. Get fired. Well, screw you. I want to say something else, but I won't since this is being recorded. I mean, that's what they're fed up about. When is enough enough? Right. And that's why I'm so aggravated with. AT&T. As much money as CWA has helped them acquire, the big money, the infrastructure money that we've helped them, that they've asked us to help them with. Right. And then they're going to try to shove some crap down our members throats. It's ridiculous. So young people need to stand up and fight back against corporate greed. That's what they need to do and continue to build this middle class. It would not be a middle class without the union. That's what I would say to them.

Claude [02:00:38] That's a perfect way to end this. Okay, terrific.