

Communications Workers of America Oral History Project

Interviewee: Hayes, Debbie

Interviewer: Jeff Rechenbach

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**Jeff** [00:00:04] I'm Jeff Reichenbach [in Cleveland, Ohio]. We're here today with Debbie Hayes at her home in Grand Island, New York. And also with us today is Debbie Goldman in Washington DC and Hannah Goldman in Brooklyn NY. We're going to conduct an interview with Debbie Hayes about her career with the Communications Workers of America. Debbie, welcome. Thanks for doing this with us. We appreciate it. [The interview was conducted on April 24, 2024 via zoom.]

**Debbie Hayes** [00:00:32] Thank you very much. It's such an honor and pleasure to be here.

**Jeff** [00:00:36] Before we get into your CWA career, let's talk a little bit about your growing up. First off, when you were born and where and a little bit about your family.

**Debbie Hayes** [00:00:55] I was born in Buffalo, New York in 1957. My parents were Paul and Joan Banyi. I grew up in the Riverside section of Buffalo. I'm the oldest of six children. My mother had five of us the first six years she was married. And then I have a sister who is 12 years younger than I. There were three boys and three girls. We grew up on what folks called the industrial curve in Buffalo. In one part of the neighborhood we lived there were a lot of small family homes. Then you would cross a major road and there was, interestingly enough, the Western Electric plant was right on the corner of my street and then J.H. Williams and a huge Chevrolet complex. So [I] grew up in a working-class neighborhood. My parents are Catholic and so we went to a Catholic grammar school, Saint Elizabeth's in Buffalo. I went there for nine years and then I went to Holy Angels Academy for high school and then D'Youville College for my degree in nursing (BSN). So I had a very, very happy childhood. We were poor but we really didn't know it at the time because my parents worked very hard.

**Jeff** [00:02:59] What kind of jobs did they do?

**Debbie Hayes** [00:03:02] My mother, before she was married to my dad, was an executive secretary for a furniture company in Buffalo and my father was a skilled tradesman. He was a pattern maker. He worked at American Standard before it closed and then worked in a small machine shop and then went to the Chevrolet Foundry before that closed. Then after my sister was born, when I was about 12, my mother went to work in the Chevrolet Forge cafeteria. So she worked for Greyhound Food Services and did that type of work. And that actually was my first [job]. I was 16 years-old and it was 5:00 one morning, I was happily sleeping away in my bed and my mother tapped me on the shoulder and she said, I think we have a job for you and whisked me away to the Foundry cafeteria. And at 16 years-old that was my first union job. I worked for the Greyhound Food Company. I was a member of the UAW. I worked cleaning tables and picking up garbage in this massive factory's cafeteria.

**Jeff** [00:04:40] Wow. I presume your father was also a UAW member at that point as well?

**Debbie Hayes** [00:04:45] All three of us were UAW members at one point, yes.

**Jeff** [00:04:51] And that Chevy plant is gone now, right, if I remember.

**Debbie Hayes** [00:04:55] It is. They closed it down. The big motor plant on River Road in Buffalo is still there. But the complex as we knew it in its heyday is gone.

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**Jeff** [00:05:16] You talked a little bit about your education. Tell us more about college and your career pursuits from there.

**Debbie Hayes** [00:05:27] So high school (1971-1975).

**Debbie Goldman** [00:05:29] Can I back up for one minute? Did you give us the year of your birth?

**Jeff** [00:05:34] She did. 1957

**Debbie Hayes** [00:05:34] 1957. Yes March 29, 1957.

**Debbie Goldman** [00:05:41] I wanted to also ask about your Catholic upbringing and how, if at all, that might have shaped your values.

**Debbie Hayes** [00:05:56] It's interesting because I was just talking about this with someone. We were taught several lessons from a very early age and our Catholic values were a part of that. My dad always taught me, number one, nothing's ever going to be handed to you. You're going to work hard for anything you get so be prepared for that. He taught me to love my sisters no matter what because when no one else is there for you, your sisters will be. He taught us to respect the elderly, and we mowed lawns and carried garbage and recycled their newspapers and were very hands-on in terms of helping elderly family and neighbors. He taught us just a lot about love and what we didn't have in money, he taught us that we had in terms of our family and we were rich in our siblings. So in terms of my Catholic faith. We went to mass every morning, from 8:00 to 8:30 before our classes started and my parents often took us on Saturdays and then we had our Sunday obligation. So we spent a great deal of time in church and part of the Catholic community in Buffalo especially in those early years. Some of the same lessons my father taught me were the lessons that I learned in school. I think the things that stuck with me the most were just taking care of the less advantaged. If there was someone who didn't have something that I did, I would share it and that included my lunch. I never liked it when people made fun of other kids for what they had or didn't have. I was always kind of a champion, or stood up for the underserved and underprivileged, and that was something I learned in school and just really followed me through the rest of my life.

**Debbie Goldman** [00:09:00] And the community you grew up in. Was it an ethnic community and what was the ethnic background of your parents?

**Debbie Hayes** [00:09:10] It was an ethnic community. Buffalo is divided into a series of ethnic communities. So the Irish settled in South Buffalo and the Italians settled on the west side and the Polish on the east side. I grew up in a Hungarian parish, Saint Elizabeth's Church. St. Elizabeth is the patron saint of Hungary and my father's parents were born in Hungary. My mother's parents, I think, were second-generation Americans, and my grandfather was German and my grandmother was German and Irish.

**Debbie Goldman** [00:10:05] And where did the blacks live in Buffalo?

**Debbie Hayes** [00:10:10] The black community lived also on the east side, inner city and east side. The demographics of the city have completely changed now. While there are still some of the traditions in neighborhoods like there was a Polish neighborhood in what is now Cheektowaga and you see street signs that have Polish names. The black members of the community now live largely

on the east side of Buffalo, north of Main Street in Buffalo in the Cheektowaga and then in the inner city. Buffalo is now a city of immigrants and even before the more recent discussions on immigration, we had several centers that welcomed immigrants and helped them get themselves and their families established in the city. So we have a massive immigrant population on the west side of Buffalo.

**Debbie Goldman** [00:11:52] I was just trying to establish that you grew up basically in a white working-class environment.

**Debbie Hayes** [00:11:58] White working-class environment? Yes. My father's best friend at American Standard was a black man named Kenny Olden. And I learned from a very young age that you just don't judge people by the color of their skin. My father taught us that very early on that you have to know the person and judge them by who they are and not the color of their skin. So we very often would go to, they call it the Fruit Belt, because all the streets are Mulberry and Peach and streets like that to visit Mr. Olden. So, although I grew up in a white working-class neighborhood, it was also not uncommon for us to visit the neighborhood where the black folks lived.

**Jeff** [00:13:14] You know, it's interesting. We've been doing these for a couple of months now and it's a common theme of the people that we've talked to is this sort of empathy for the underdog or the underserved early on in their lives and that sort of manifest themselves at some point later on into a career in the labor movement. In your case, obviously, that was that situation as well. So you've stayed in Buffalo basically all your life. Are your siblings all still in the Buffalo area?

**Debbie Hayes** [00:13:54] I have one sister that now lives in North Carolina. She followed her daughters there after college so she could be close to her grandchildren. And I have a brother who after he was married moved to California and so he's been on the west coast his whole adult life. My mom passed away in 2021 when she was 88 years-old and my dad is going to be 94 in June and he is still alive and lives in the home I grew up in.

**Jeff** [00:14:46] Well, you're swimming in a pretty good gene pool there.

**Debbie Hayes** [00:14:49] I am.

**Jeff** [00:14:50] Yes. Good for you. Okay, so let's talk a little bit about college and your career choice. You at some point decided you were going to go into the health care profession. How did that all evolve?

**Debbie Hayes** [00:15:09] I knew that I wanted to be -- I wasn't sure if I wanted to be a doctor or nurse. I loved babies and I loved obstetrics and I thought that might be a career for me. But toward my junior year in high school, I wasn't sure if I had the grades that would get me into a medical school. I had a wonderful guidance counselor in high school and we talked about nursing as a profession. Due to the fact that D'Youville College was right in our backyard and they had an excellent nursing program, I enrolled there. High school years were tough years for me because I was always the kid that was born on the wrong side of the tracks. College was just the opposite. College was just wonderful and I felt like they were years where I could really find myself and I learned and I loved what I was learning. I had great friends. So four very, very good years. When I was 20, right after my sophomore year, I moved into my own apartment, so I have been independent since I was 20 years-old. About the same time I left my job at the Chevrolet Foundry

cafeteria and went to work at a nursing home [Niagra Lutheran Home], which was the first job I had in the health care industry. I worked there as a certified nursing assistant. It was excellent experience for me to start to get my feet wet in the profession. I worked at the nursing home as a CNA [certified nursing assistant] and after three years of college I could take my LPN [licensed practical nurse] exam and work as an LPN which I did for several months at the nursing home and then went to work at Buffalo General Hospital.

**Jeff** [00:17:57] Buffalo General is where your union inspirations began to generate? Do I have that correct?

**Debbie Hayes** [00:18:10] Yes. When I graduated from college in 1979 I became a registered nurse and changed units and started working with the new group of nurses. It didn't take very long for me, number one, to experience reality shock. So the difference in what you learn in school and what it's like when you're actually in the workplace was extremely different. And then I'd listen to my coworkers, especially nurses who had been there for a while, about just how difficult the work conditions were and how they felt like they were undervalued, short-staffed, and that the wages and benefits that folks were making at the time were completely wrong for the educational levels that people had and for the type of work that we did every day. So that is where it started.

**Jeff** [00:19:38] And so, out of that, you've got this robust UAW background. How did you happen to think about the Communications Workers [of America] as the path to organizing within the hospital.

**Debbie Hayes** [00:19:57] We originally wanted to -- and this is a whole long side story. I'm not sure that --.

**Jeff** [00:20:07] That's what we're here for, long side stories. Go for it.

**Debbie Hayes** [00:20:10] Okay. So when I took my nursing boards in 1979, they were two eight-hour days of answering questions. Back then it cost \$150 to take them and you would go to a convention center and you would sit in a massive room of people and you just answer these questions for 16 hours. The year that I took my boards, the Commissioner of the Board of Regents in New York state decided that he was going to invalidate the boards because he had 28 anonymous letters that there was cheating going on. And we went to the New York State Nurses Association, NYSNA, for help. They basically said, look, pay your registration fee and just sit and take the boards again. That was completely unacceptable to graduate nurses in New York. So we formed these graduate nurse groups all across New York state and we decided to sue the state of New York. Part of what we did is collect signatures on a petition in support of what we were doing. The Commissioner came to Buffalo to do a press conference. During the press conference I had my uniform and my cap on and I presented him with these petitions. An organizer from 1199 from SEIU was there. He tapped me on the shoulder afterwards and said, if you can do this with graduate nurses across New York state imagine what you could do in a hospital where you have problems. And he said, have you thought about unionizing? At that point we had not. He gave me his card and he said, if you're ever interested you should call me, which is exactly what I did. But there was another union in Buffalo that SEIU was a part of. They had formed a council to organize healthcare workers. It was SEIU, the hotel workers, and the laundry workers. When we did call, this man's name was Bruce Popper and he was from Rochester, New York. When we did call Bruce and told him we were interested in organizing and had a couple meetings with him, the president of this

council, who also had ties to the Mafia, brought him in and sat him down and said, this is my territory and so you need to stay out of here. And his sidekick opened his suit coat and you could see he had a gun on the side of his belt. Bruce had to stay out of Buffalo, and this council wanted us to organize with them. We had absolutely no desire to be a part of their organization and so we felt kind of lost. We didn't want to go to NYSNA because they told us pay your registration fee and re-take the boards. And we didn't want to go with this Mafia-dominated hospital council and SEIU wasn't there. So there was an article in the paper about our plight and a woman named Ronnie Waldrige from the VNA [Visiting Nurses Association] called me and said, listen, my husband is a manager at New York Telephone. He told me the union that represents the workers there is incredible and told us to organize with CWA, which they did. They had just gotten their first contract and she told me you really need to call CWA and meet with them. And so that's what we did. We called Local 1122. Don Hoak was the president there. But there were two people in particular on the board at that time, Chris Kroetsch and Jerry Hayes. The whole Local, but especially Chris and Jerry, took us under their wing and taught us everything we needed to know about organizing a union. And I tell everybody the industry doesn't matter. Morty [Bahr, CWA national president 1985-2005] and I had this conversation once when he was in Buffalo. We were getting ready to do a press conference and he said to me, Debbie, I don't know anything about health care. I said, Morty, I don't know anything about unions so you could learn health care from me and I'll learn about unions from you and we'll be good. And that's exactly the way it it went. I learned everything I know about organizing, representing ourselves from the telephone workers and [Local] 1122 and other colleagues in the district.

**Jeff** [00:26:47] What an incredible moment of serendipity there. Just somebody to call out of the blue and say, hey, this is the union you should talk to.

**Debbie Hayes** [00:26:56] Yeah.

**Jeff** [00:26:57] And a recommendation coming from a manager that worked with the union makes it all the more interesting. So that's incredible. What a story.

**Debbie Hayes** [00:27:09] It is incredible. And just around this, I will tell you that while we were organizing with CWA, my car got vandalized three times. Once at work, once in front of my apartment, and once when I was at a union meeting. It never dawned on me that someone was trying to scare me or do me harm until several years later, an FBI agent showed up at our office, and he had his big gold badge, and he knew everything that had happened to me and about the vandalizing. They knew who did it and why they did it because they were trying to scare us into joining this hospital and nursing home council. I was so just naive and I guess inexperienced at the time that it never dawned on me that that's what was happening.

**Jeff** [00:28:26] Wow. Frightening in hindsight.

**Debbie Hayes** [00:28:29] Yes. Yeah.

**Debbie Goldman** [00:28:31] What is VNA?

**Debbie Hayes** [00:28:34] The Visiting Nurses Association. It's now of western New York. It has grown from several hundred members to almost 600 members in the eight counties of western New York.

**Jeff** [00:28:58] Let's take a few minutes and talk a little more about the organizing campaign at Buffalo General and the role that the folks at 1122 played. Jerry and Chris are great friends of mine. They're wonderful people. So I'd like to hear more about that.

**Debbie Hayes** [00:29:14] They are. But it was interesting to me that back in the early [19]80s Jerry was really a feminist. He was Chris's greatest supporter and really treated us with the kind of respect and believed in us in a way that we never received at work. The way they taught us to organize was very similar to the CWA model. Map the workplace. Identify all the areas where nurses work. Get contacts from all those areas on all shifts. Build the committee and then we'll go from there. And the interesting thing with Chris and Jerry is I don't know if they showed up at one meeting that we did. They would meet with us. Teach us what we needed to know. Help us set the agenda. Any materials we needed we could get from the office. But then the meetings we did, we did on our own. They taught us to be very independent, to be sure about what we were doing and why we were doing it. I still am afraid of public speaking, but I would get up in front of my coworkers and groups of nurses and talk about my experience at the UAW and why the union made sense at Buffalo General. So it took us a long time. It took us well over a year to organize the nurses there.

**Jeff** [00:31:44] And what year is this?

**Debbie Hayes** [00:31:46] I think we organized starting in either late [19]80 or [19]81 and we had our certification election in June of [19]82. Any of these dates, if you want more accurate dates, I definitely can do more research into this to make sure that everything is completely accurate. But those were the years that we organized. In June of [19]82 we had our election and I believe we were certified around June 19th of that year. Now the interesting thing is I could not vote in the election because the job title I had at the time was assistant head nurse which was very similar to a charge nurse position. It was determined that my job was a management position. So after the election I took a job in the operating room so I could get back into the bargaining unit and then became in November, after all that was done, I was elected president of the Local.

**Jeff** [00:33:27] And so you had your own Local. That was just the workers there in the hospital. It wasn't part of 1122.

**Debbie Hayes** [00:33:34] Right. We became Local 1168. I think that's one of the most wonderful things about the work that the Local did with us because they knew from the very beginning that we wanted to be our own Local. We really wanted to work on behalf of our own interests and be our own organization. That was an issue from day one. So every hour, every penny, all of the energy that they put into our campaign was not because they thought they were going to have 750 new members. It was because they really believed in us and wanted to support us through the campaign. And then we established our own Local.

**Jeff** [00:34:35] How wonderful is that, right?

**Debbie Hayes** [00:34:37] Wonderful.

**Jeff** [00:34:39] So you've done this monumental task. You've organized this group of nurses, you get yourself elected as their Local president. You take a downgrade from quasi-management

position to go into the bargaining unit. You're elected Local president. Now you've got to get a contract. So tell us a little bit about that experience.

**Debbie Hayes** [00:35:05] In the months between June, 1982 and November, 1982, the folks in the bargaining unit really went about all of the tasks that you have to do to establish a Local. They wrote bylaws. They found an office, they elected a bargaining committee, prepared for negotiations, and they were actually at the bargaining table in November when I was elected. And it's really funny because even when I was still in management, after they started to put the bylaws together, they came to me and said, Debbie, we think you should be Local president. And I said, okay, if that's what you want me to do, that's what I'll do. I'm trying to get into the operating room so as soon as that works out I'll let you know and we can hold an election. I went then from being elected right to the bargaining table because negotiations had already begun. It was clear from the very beginning that we were in trouble in bargaining. The hospital hired a union-busting attorney from Rochester, New York. Carl Kraus his name was. Very typical anti-union actions. Limited time at the bargaining table, unwillingness to reach tentative agreements. Every article that we talked about there was something that they knew we just couldn't agree to. We were going to get a contract, a first contract. It was important to us to get a good first contract. So we bargained through the end of [19]82 and into [19]83. We continued to organize inside the bargaining unit. And the worse we were treated at the bargaining table and reported what was happening to our members, the stronger and more committed to one another they became. We thought by March that we might have to go on strike because they just were not moving to a contract. And I remember being very nervous about this membership meeting where we had to talk to the members about the possibility of striking. When we gave them the bargaining update, people in the room were just saying we should go on strike, we should go on strike. We didn't even have to worry about bringing the topic up because everybody was fed up.

**Debbie Hayes** [00:38:43] As it turned out we did have to go on strike to get that first contract May 1st of 1983. We were on strike for about 80 days. It was around somewhere between July 19th and the 21st. I couldn't remember the exact date that the strike ended. Boy. I would say that those were -- This is just another aside. On April 9th I got married. It was probably the dumbest thing I have ever done and then shortly afterwards found out that I was pregnant. So I was doing all this while I was pregnant. And my wedding reception in Long Island where my ex-husband was from was leading up to the strike. The strike date was set when I was at my wedding reception. And so to me, I feel like it was a low moment in my career because I wasn't there for the last day of bargaining. By the time I got back to Buffalo, the strike had already started. But that was one of the most difficult periods of my life. I had no idea the responsibility that you felt. It felt like the weight of the world and the responsibility for all those nurses and their families was resting squarely on my shoulders. The hospital very early on in the strike told us and told the community that any nurse that went on strike would never work at Buffalo General again, that they were going to replace us and the hospital would resume operations and the strike would be over. So we really felt as though we were in a struggle for our very existence. And we went from being very timid little -- Dick Lipsitz Senior, who was our lawyer at the time, told us you went from a bunch of Florence Nightingales into these fighters on the picket line, and it's exactly what happened. We were fighting for our existence and so we had to use every method, every tool that we could, to win that strike and get our jobs back.

**Debbie Hayes** [00:42:13] I remember on the first day of the strike, I don't know if you remember Don Hoak but he was a big man. He came to the picket line at our emergency room entrance and



one of the first cars that went through, he pulled a screwdriver out of his pocket and stuck it in the radiator and the car died. The nurses called our office, and we're like, there's this guy out here and you better get him out of here. He just shoved a screwdriver in the radiator. The car's dead. The police are here. So we went running over and the folks from the telephone company all thought it was pretty comical. And the nurses were upset. By the end of the strike we had a nurse who couldn't stop a car. So she threw herself up on of the hood of the car and blocked the windshield. So that's what we went from, from being scared to being very active on the picket lines.

**Jeff** [00:43:27] Quite an evolution.

**Debbie Hayes** [00:43:30] In a short period of time. (laughs)

**Jeff** [00:43:32] But what an incredible time in your life. You're leading an organizing drive from a management position so obviously at some substantial risk of your employment. You organized the union. You transfer out of that job to another job, you become president of the Local, you get married, you become pregnant, and you lead a strike all at the same time. I mean, obviously we were all much younger then and maybe didn't feel the stress that had to be monumental. Like you said, the responsibility that you feel as a Local leader when you're on strike is just like nothing else you've ever felt. So how did the strike ultimately get resolved? Talk about the contract that you achieved at that point.

**Jeff** [00:44:28] Let me ask you one quick question. Buffalo General, is that a privately owned hospital or --

**Debbie Hayes** [00:44:34] It is a private, not-for-profit in New York. Yes. Like many strikes, it did not get settled at the bargaining table. We had no idea how this world worked, but we knew that we were winning because the hospital was only able to hire about 42 permanent replacements. We knew that the volume was not there. At that time Buffalo General was 1,110 beds. They only had about 300 functioning beds that were staffed by management and we had about a hundred scabs, people who just never went out on strike. People did not cross the picket line and go back to work. But we couldn't get movement at the table. Morty [Bahr], who was the District 1 vice-president at the time. Somehow a connection was developed between the Board of Trustees' president and Morty. Those were the two that talked and figured out how things would, or discussed the possibility of, how things would end. We were kind of punks at the time and so that was infuriating to us because we felt like we brought this fight this far and now the contract is going to be settled without us. But what Morty did, and what we learned, is that he went in with our list of the 6 or 7 items that were open when we went on strike and pushed them as far as he could possibly get them. The biggest issue, the one that I remember, the union issues we were able to resolve, were wages. I think we were looking for a 10% raise or some very high number. Back then I was making about \$8.63 or something like that an hour and we ended up with a two-year contract, I believe, with a 6% and a 6% increase, and then a resolution on the issues that were still open. Really, the culmination, as difficult as it was for us to accept that this was as much as we were going to get. We had to sit down as an executive board and a bargaining committee and decide if what Morty was able to negotiate was something that we were willing to take back to the members. We deliberated for hours and finally decided that we would take it back and that we would recommend a ratification.

**Debbie Hayes** [00:48:22] So we had 650 people that were on strike. I think virtually everybody was at the meeting. We had it at the Marigold Manor. It was full. The room was packed and we went

through the terms of the agreement. Then I just remember giving this very impassioned speech about what we had achieved and why this was a good contract and that now the fight had to move from the streets back into the hospital. We had to take the contract that we had fought so hard for and implement it inside the facility. I was physically and mentally and emotionally exhausted. So I started crying. There was a bar there, unfortunately, where some of the folks had been drinking. And when I started crying, one of the guys that were on strike started calling me names and yelling and hooting and hollering from where he was standing. My ex-husband was in the room and one of the guys that was on the bargaining committee, who I just to this day adore, and they kind of jumped this guy. So there was a huge fight. Oh, what a mess it turned out to be. The press had followed us for months. We were on the news and on the front page of the paper every day for 80 days, all kinds of articles. We have quite a library of those days and everything that we went through. So there was a reporter right outside the room waiting to come in and do a story once we were through with our meeting. So it was just a scene like I had never been a part of before. But the contract was ratified wholeheartedly that night and that's how the strike ended.

**Jeff** [00:51:14] What an incredible string of events to get you to that point.

**Debbie Hayes** [00:51:20] So it really was.

**Jeff** [00:51:23] Do you recall offhand what was on the table when you actually went on strike versus what we accomplished by the end of it?

**Debbie Hayes** [00:51:31] I don't remember exactly but I could find out, Jeff. So truly, if there's anything more that we would like to add to this and be more detail-oriented, I can go over to the Local. I'm working with one of the women there to make sure that the history is as clearly documented as possible. So it wouldn't take much for us to.

**Jeff** [00:52:01] That's wonderful. Yes. What you could do, if you're going to send us a picture of yourself for this interview, maybe you could take a picture of 1 or 2 of the headlines from the Buffalo paper and send those along to us as well.

**Debbie Hayes** [00:52:18] Absolutely.

**Jeff** [00:52:19] I think that would be kind of -- We're trying to think of what else we can do with these interviews as we go forward. Having something like that I think could be useful for us going forward.

**Debbie Hayes** [00:52:33] If you don't mind, I have two pictures of myself. One that I laugh at, which is the picture of me in my uniform giving the Commissioner the petitions. But there's one, me marching in front of a rally, a procession of about a thousand people. We had a church, the priest that was about a block away from the hospital let us use his church and school hall for our meetings and rallies. And then we marched out of the hall and around up Main Street, around the hospital, and circled the hospital. That is my favorite picture of myself ever, I think.

**Jeff** [00:53:27] Please share that.

**Debbie Hayes** [00:53:29] But maybe I'll give you that picture for this interview.

**Jeff** [00:53:35] Please share that. That would be great. We don't know exactly what we're going to be doing with these going forward. They're going to be deposited in the labor archives. But beyond that, we'd like to do some things with them.

**Debbie Goldman** [00:54:01] I don't want to slow it down because we've got a lot to cover, but I have a few follow ups. First of all, your Local archives and papers are still at the Local?

**Debbie Hayes** [00:54:12] Yes.

**Debbie Goldman** [00:54:14] Do not throw them out.

**Debbie Hayes** [00:54:16] No. We won't.

**Debbie Goldman** [00:54:17] If you have to move, talk to me and we'll figure out a way to get them to the CWA archives at NYU. But do not throw them out.

**Debbie Hayes** [00:54:27] We definitely will not.

**Debbie Goldman** [00:54:29] And nobody has written up this story in any kind of narrative, correct?

**Debbie Hayes** [00:54:38] So one of our secretaries was getting her Master's degree and she actually did her thesis on this. Just last week, I discovered that there was a hardbound copy of the work she did in the Local. So that does exist.

**Debbie Goldman** [00:55:04] It's hardbound so it would probably be pretty time consuming to scan and PDF it, but I would love to see it. Or to make a copy of it.

**Debbie Hayes** [00:55:15] We will send that.

**Debbie Goldman** [00:55:16] Absolutely. Thank you. A few follow-ups. How many of your 650 strikers were women?

**Debbie Hayes** [00:55:28] Almost. Hmm, over 90% maybe closer to 95%.

**Debbie Goldman** [00:55:40] Okay.

**Debbie Hayes** [00:55:40] This was a real -- and the strike was led by women. There was one man on the bargaining committee. There was maybe one other man that worked in the strike office. But this was a real women's campaign.

**Debbie Goldman** [00:56:13] Was a women's consciousness of feminism part of what was unifying and motivating the nurses?

**Debbie Hayes** [00:56:30] I remember back then we were going through all this and the organizing campaign. And Jerry said to me, you know, Debbie, you're a real feminist. And I was like, whoa, I wasn't sure how to take that, because back then, if you used the word feminist, you weren't really sure if you were getting a compliment or if somebody was taking a shot, saying something derogatory about you. But the more I thought about it, the more I thought, well, Jerry's probably

right. This is a feminist campaign because our issues were working-women's issues. Like we wanted a child care center at the hospital and we did open General Child Care, which was an on-site childcare facility. We wanted flexible working hours. We did not want the fact that you were pregnant and on a leave of absence to affect your seniority date. We wanted to make sure that women had the leave time they needed to care for families. And while we were on strike, you not only see the best of people, but you see the worst. How should I say this? You see the tragedies that some women live. That's the best way to say it.

**Debbie Hayes** [00:58:16] So we had one woman who would come into the office and her husband would be leading the way, all red-faced, and she would be kind of cowering behind him, and he would be screaming at us about why his wife couldn't go to work. It just broke your heart. You just wanted to hug her and say, are you okay? And what can we do to help you? Because if he acted the way he did in public, we were sure that he smacked her around at home. Any marriage, Larry Mancino [former District 1 vice-president] said this once and I think it's true. If you do this work, it'll take a good marriage and strain it. And it'll take a bad marriage and ruin it or end it. That's what happened to me. I probably should have never got married to my husband. By the time we were going through the strike I wanted him to go back to Long Island and never come back because I felt like he was negatively affecting my ability to do my job. You saw that. You saw an increase in the amount that people were drinking and you saw the stresses it put on families. For some families, the loss of income is felt immediately because there's no cushion when you're making eight bucks an hour you're living paycheck to paycheck.

**Debbie Goldman** [01:00:16] Were there strike benefits?

**Debbie Hayes** [01:00:18] There were strike benefits. Any time anybody talks about CWA and the Defense Fund, now the Members' Relief Fund, I tell them they invested \$750,000 in Buffalo before we ever paid a penny in dues, and it's what saved us. Debbie, we were out on strike long enough where we could start to collect unemployment in New York. You had to be on strike for seven weeks before unemployment benefits kicked in. But people really struggled. The support from the Defense Fund really was a significant part of helping us keep people on the picket lines and from going back to work.

**Debbie Goldman** [01:01:17] I have two more follow-ups. Often, one hears that it's difficult for nurses to strike because nurses care about their patients. As I look at your timeline, not only this strike, but you had a strike against DeGraff Memorial in 1987 and I think other strikes as well. So how do you respond and how did the nurses feel about that tension?

**Debbie Hayes** [01:01:58] The way we talked about it back then and it's going to sound kind of cold, but it's just what it was. It's the hospital's responsibility to care for the patients and they hire us to do it. And we also talked about the fact that if we can't take care of ourselves, then we'll never be able to adequately care for our patients. We have to do what's right for us first and then we can go back in under better circumstances to care for our patients. Safe staffing in hospitals is an issue that I have fought for my entire career. It was an issue back then when a normal assignment for me on the evening shift, I worked 3 pm to 11 pm, was either myself and ten patients or myself and 14 patients. The kind of floor that I worked on was a teaching surgical unit and we had a lot of big chest and belly cases. It was physically impossible to provide the care that people needed, especially when you had 14 patients. The union, CWA, and our political legislative department has worked very, very hard with us in New York to finally, in 2021 pass legislation on these clinical staffing

committees and a requirement that hospitals meet with their direct caregivers and develop ratios. But, that's the way we talked about it, Debbie. The hospitals hired us to do the work and if they can't treat us the way that we deserve to be treated then they have to find somebody else to do it. And if we don't stand up for ourselves, nobody else is going to come in and do it for us. We have to take care of ourselves.

**Debbie Goldman** [01:04:36] Powerful message. Last question at this point. Buffalo was a union town. I think still is a union town. How did that impact the nurses? Did they come from union families, union areas and community support as you were organizing and on strike?

**Debbie Hayes** [01:04:59] Buffalo definitely was a union town back then. The manufacturing was still there. We would have these rallies and the president of the Buffalo AFL-CIO Council would be there and all the people from his executive board, from the UAW and the Steelworkers and the Teamsters, and they were always up on the dais with us sharing their words of support. I'll never forget the day that the Buffalo Teachers Federation, Phil Rumour was having an educational meeting at Kleinman's Music Hall and marched his teachers all the way up to the hospital and then surrounded the hospital. I was at the strike office, and again I got a call and ran over, and it was filled with all his unionized teachers just marching around the hospital. The support that we received from organized labor and the community was amazing. Nonunion nurses joined with union nurses from other facilities and held fundraisers for us and beer blasts. It was just amazing.

**Jeff** [01:06:41] Okay, so you've, survived this experience of organizing and getting a first contract, and a successful pregnancy I take it as well.

**Debbie Hayes** [01:06:54] I did, I had in November of that year my oldest daughter who turned 40 last year.

**Jeff** [01:07:03] Okay. Well, good. So where do you go from here? I mean, we all sort of know a little bit about the history. It's not just Buffalo General that is part of Nurses United. Talk a little bit about where you moved on from there.

**Debbie Hayes** [01:07:25] After the strike, we really had to learn how to be a Local because we did not function as one while we were on strike. We functioned as a striking entity for the first however many months of our career. We were either bargaining or on strike. So we just went about learning how to be a Local. What our dues income would be, who would be in the office, how many days a week working, how we would represent ourselves, building a representation structure inside the hospital. We had to have a mediator come in and facilitate the rebuilding of the relationship between the nurses and the hospital. When we went on strike, another unfortunate thing was that they laid-off about a thousand people from the hospital because the census went from over 1,110 to 300 [beds]. So we had to mend fences with our coworkers who had been laid-off during the time that we were on strike. We had this initial period of rebuilding when we went back to work. It was really difficult. The first day I went back to work in the operating room, they put me in a room with probably one of the toughest surgeons to work with. He hated the whole concept of unionizing to begin with, but then doctors who even who had been supportive of us turned against us because the strike affected their pocketbook, especially the surgeons. They couldn't work, or they had to go someplace else to work. And that's the room that they put me in my first day back. It was meant to terrify me. And in fact, it did. It was a tough day. But that's kind of what we went through. But when we went back in, we knew where everyone was. We knew all of our coworkers who had been

on the line with us. We knew where the scabs were, where the permanent replacements were, so we knew where we had to be careful and where we had allies. But we had a mediator help us rebuild the relationship. And it worked. We developed a good work relationship there.

**Debbie Hayes** [01:10:50] I would say separate from the day-to-day stuff, the most exciting thing that happened is between 1985 and 1991, I would say, there was this whole rash of health care worker organizing in Buffalo that really led to not just the expansion of our Local, but the creation of at least one additional Local, which is 1133, which represents workers in the Catholic Health system. Surprisingly, many of the workers that had been laid-off while we were on strike organized with our Local in a technical clerical service unit. We organized the same bargaining unit at DeGraff Memorial Hospital. We organized a professional unit at Planned Parenthood, the nurse practitioners and the providers there. Then we organized at Saint Joseph Hospital and those nurses came into our Local. We had an organizing campaign at Our Lady of Victory Hospital which we lost. It was one of the few or maybe the only organizing loss we experienced during that time frame. Then Local 1133 was formed around the organizing at Mercy Hospital of a huge service technical clerical unit and an RN [registered nurse] unit. The RNs lost their election the first time and then won it a year later. So I would say that was the major building that was done at that time in terms of organizing.

**Debbie Hayes** [01:13:24] We became very active. I'm really proud of the work we did in the Local because we had all these wonderful people and everybody had a different area of interest. One of my vice-presidents a little bit later, Patty DeVinny, was really into politics and legislative work so she headed that up. We had another nurse who worked in the operating room who was worried about the gases up there and filtering gases and miscarriages that were happening. She became our health-safety director by virtue of the work she did up there. We had one nurse, his name was Larry Cudak, who was a brilliant writer and he wrote all of our updates while we were on strike, all of our newsletters. He took over as editor of our Local newsletter. I could just go on and on, but we just developed a very strong, multi-pronged Local, stayed very close to the people in the community that helped us and did organizing.

**Debbie Hayes** [01:14:58] We had another rash of organizing which I tried to include in the timeline. Around 1997/1998 Buffalo General merged with a number of other hospitals, merged with the two Millard Fillmore hospitals, the Children's Hospital of Buffalo and DeGraff was an affiliate of Buffalo General at the time, so they affiliated, full asset merger, became one employer, one organization. As part of the merger agreement we were able to negotiate card check and neutrality. So we literally organized probably another 2,000 workers as a result of that card check and neutrality. By the time I left the Local in 2000, our membership went from 750 RNs in 1982 to about 4,500 members in 2000.

**Jeff** [01:16:32] Well, technically it went from zero.

**Debbie Hayes** [01:16:37] Technically went from 0 to 4,500 people. Yes.

**Jeff** [01:16:41] And then how many more are over in 1133?

**Debbie Hayes** [01:16:46] About 2,200.

**Jeff** [01:16:48] Wow.

**Debbie Hayes** [01:16:51] There they have almost everybody at Mercy Hospital of Buffalo and then they have the nurses and the technical folks at Kenmore Mercy Hospital as well. We also have a lot of smaller units now. We organized another unit at Planned Parenthood. We organized a small nursing home in Gasport. We organized an ambulatory surgery center. So there are a number of smaller bargaining units there as well.

**Jeff** [01:17:37] How does it feel to be the seedling for all of that growth? It's just an amazing record to hear.

**Debbie Hayes** [01:17:48] I guess when I look back at my life now, and I've had this conversation with Dennis [Trainor, vice-president of District 1 at the time of the interview], so I'm comfortable having it with you. But I told him next year, I'm probably going to retire and I'll be 68 at the time. It's just time for me to go. There are some very young, strong people that I'm working with. It's really exciting to see them develop in the roles that they are in and looking forward to really taking these leadership positions in the union. So for the first time in my career, just feeling a little tired, and maybe it is time for younger folks to be doing the work. I remember in 2022, I was doing a big set of negotiations and I just thought, oh my God, this is really kicking my ass. Maybe I'm not on my A-game anymore. It's kind of a tough place to be because I feel like the union CWA and especially the Local are as much a part of me as my children are. I feel like I was there from the beginning. I helped birth it. I helped it to grow into the organization it is. And so there's a part of me that is very, very, very proud because I feel like I can go to my grave knowing that I made a difference, that there were people who needed help, that I was able to help. And then there's a part of me that's just very sad because it's what I've done since I was 22 years-old. It's been my entire career move from nursing, which I loved, into representing health care workers and trying to make their lives better while they cared for the patients. And so I don't think it's going to be very easy for me to walk away from this. I think it's going to be hard. But I am proud of the work that we all did.

**Jeff** [01:20:39] It's no surprise that you feel like CWA is your family. You ran a simultaneous gestation there with kids. It's pretty remarkable. It's like you had twins.

**Debbie Hayes** [01:20:52] That's sweet. Well, let me tell you this. So when we were on strike at DeGraff in 1987, I was pregnant.

**Jeff** [01:20:59] I wanted to get to that.

**Debbie Hayes** [01:21:01] I was pregnant with my second daughter, Caitlin. Then I did have twins in 1990 when we were bargaining a contract there for the technical clerical unit at Buffalo General. Folks laughed at me because I would just lay on the floor with my big old belly on the wood just to take pressure off my back and legs and just kind of holler up from the floor what I was thinking. So you're absolutely right, Jeff. I just raised my family and built the Local at the same time. They were things that were going on simultaneously. And eventually, when my twins were two, I did get divorced because my initial instinct was right, which is my marriage was just a really bad idea. And so, it was myself and my four daughters that were really a unit as we were moving through this. It's a whole separate conversation but the effect that it had on my daughters is amazing. It wasn't just me. It's going to union meetings, being on picket lines, getting to know the other workers and their families, understanding the work I did and the struggle and the impact that it's had on all their lives, is also something that I'm really, really proud of.

**Jeff** [01:22:49] Good reason.

**Debbie Goldman** [01:22:52] I'd just like to have you finish that off. Talk about the impact on your daughters. For a while you were a single mom of four daughters and a union president and I don't know if at that time you were still working as a nurse or were totally off the job. That's amazing. How did you do it all? And tell us a little more about the impact on your daughters.

**Debbie Hayes** [01:23:20] So. Let's see. I don't even know how to start with this. And I might cry. (choking up) Because my mother just stepped in. You can't do it by yourself. And so what you can't do, you need help with and my mother did that for years and years and years, and she never complained, she never hesitated. If I needed help with the kids, she did it. I've always been a firm believer that it takes a village, even before Hillary Clinton talked about it I knew it took a village. I would bring a baby to a meeting and someone on the board would take the baby and feed and burp and hold her while I conducted a meeting. There were always toys in our offices. My daughters loved being in the union office, just like me. They were working with and living with and playing with people of color. So the issue of race was never an issue for my daughters. They were just people and friends and coworkers of mine that they loved. They're all professional women. Two are in unions. One's a journalist. One is a nurse practitioner at John R. Oishei Children's Hospital. One is a nurse at Buffalo General and then one is a teacher. So I taught them the same lesson my father taught me, which is you're going to work hard for everything you get in life. You're all going to school. You're all going to have a degree. What I learned is you have to be able to take care of yourself. Everybody should have a job where you have wages and benefits, where you could take care of yourself and anything after that I always told them is gravy. If you get married, if you have a partner, if you have a second income, that's good. But you don't ever want to struggle or not be able to care for yourself. They learned that lesson. They learned everything about unionism. They're all very, very progressive thinkers. They're all kind-hearted to a fault. They will give you their meal if you don't have one. They were all kind of raised the same way that I was. Four very strong women, not perfect. Like all five of us, we have our flaws and our weaknesses. But I feel the way they were raised and the environment we lived in -- My one daughter, one of the twins, still can't go grocery shopping with me because we used to get up to the cash register and we would have everything on the conveyor belt, and then it would be: do I have enough money? Do I have a check I could write until I get paid in two days, or do I have a credit card with room on it? And she would always be terrified of what would happen. What would happen if I didn't? We still laugh about it, but we just took care of each other and my mother was just there for them. It was a struggle but I wouldn't have had it any other way. My marriage was bad. It was abusive, which I don't think I've ever said to anybody before, and I couldn't stay in it. That's the other thing that they learned. You don't have to stay in a relationship if it's unhealthy for you, if it's abusive. You have to be strong enough to stand up and walk away from it. So there are quite a few lessons they've pulled out of this life that was our family, our union life that was just ever so intertwined as they were growing up.

**Jeff** [01:29:23] I was pausing because I don't want to change direction too much on this, but that's just a remarkable legacy that your mother has left, and now you've left with these four young women.

**Debbie Hayes** [01:29:38] They adored her. And she was a tough love grandma. She raised them the way she raised us. And they adored, adored her, just adored her. She took good care of them.



**Debbie Goldman** [01:30:04] What was your mom's name?

**Debbie Hayes** [01:30:06] Joan (Hertel) Banyl.

**Jeff** [01:30:13] How did you get card check? Talk about that experience. You sort of just tossed that out, like, well we got card check. There's got to be more to that story than just a quick aside.

**Debbie Hayes** [01:30:29] The person that I have to give credit for that, Jeff, is Larry Cohen because Larry, and I don't remember the CWA history when it was first negotiated and what bargaining units came in under card check. [Larry Cohen was CWA organizing director, then executive vice-president, and CWA president 2005-2015.] But I remember talking to Larry quite a bit about it. Larry told me, he said, Debbie, two sentences on card check is worth more than a page on neutrality. He said while neutrality is good and you want them to try and remain neutral in an organizing campaign, card check is the real deal. That's what you gotta get. And so when we were doing this merger agreement, we had these two big hospitals that were nonunion. The Children's Hospital was organized by SEIU. After that old hospital nursing home council fell apart, SEIU stepped in and took over there. There were two big nonunion adult hospitals, and we were talking about what if we consolidate work and if we move work from Buffalo General to Millard and we kept arguing, we don't want to go from a union to a nonunion facility. We want to maintain our union status and the hospital's position was you can't be a lone union member in a hospital where there's no union. This is the short version of the story. But we negotiated card check and neutrality and that was the compromise. If you want to be able to move work, if you want to be able to consolidate services, if you want to realize all the advantages of merging these facilities, then we need to know that our union status will be protected as we move through the various mergers. And so they did do a lot of consolidation and this card check and neutrality language saved us. We signed the merger agreement in [19]98. By [19]99, we were at the bargaining table for the RNs Millard Fillmore Gate Circle Hospital and bargained their first contract. By the time we were bargaining for them, they were organizing at the suburban hospital. So when they started moving work around, it was fairly easy to deal with. The hardest -- we also had to over those years develop a very good work relationship with 1199 SEIU because there were also some consolidations of work that got done between the Children's Hospital and the adult hospital, mostly women's services. We still have a very good work relationship there, but that is how we ended up with card check, by and large, what we learned from Larry.

**Jeff** [01:34:49] So what was the point of leverage, though, that made the hospitals feel like they had to give that to us in order to move forward?

**Debbie Hayes** [01:35:00] So there were two things. I think the first is that in 1980, I don't remember when, sometime in the mid [19]80s. The staff that allowed the strike to happen, the administrative staff, was let go and they brought new leadership into Buffalo General. They hired a guy named John Friedlander as the president and CEO. It was just Buffalo General at the time. When he came in, he asked for a meeting with me and he said, look, we can continue this fight or we can work together to fix Buffalo General, to fix the damage that was done because of the strike and because of the changes in the health care industry and the leadership that was in place. He said my preference is to work with you because I have visions of what Buffalo General can become. But it's going to take all of us to get it there. And John and I developed a great work relationship. It got off to a little bit of a bumpy start, but over the years we developed a great work relationship. Related to card check, I said to him, look John, if you want to consolidate services, if you want to

be able to turn this group of individual hospitals into a system and get all the advantages of a system, you're going to need to give too and this is what we're looking for. I think what they really discovered is that it would almost be easier for everyone to be union, because at least there would be one set of rules that would govern everybody at all the facilities. And in fact, not only did we get neutrality and card check, but they agreed to sit down with us in 2000 and bargain a master agreement. So we bargained a contract for all the workers that we represented, SEIU represented, and the Operating Engineers at the time were a part of our coalition as well. So we essentially sat down and bargained for about 8,000 workers under one collective bargaining agreement. As much as I was a rabble rouser, yeller, screamer, swearer in the early days of doing this part of what I learned is that if you can have a conversation with someone, if you're not able to talk through and work through the issues, you're not going to get the job done on behalf of your members. You have to be able to talk to one another. And that was the relationship that we developed and for some number of years, the relationship that we had with the hospital. I think that led to our ability to negotiate the neutrality and card check and a common expiration date, common bargaining table. I can't think of anything more than that in terms of leverage. I think that's really what got it done.

**Jeff** [01:39:42] It's wonderful. So you're president of 1168 for how long before you joined the staff?

**Debbie Hayes** [01:39:50] For 18 years.

**Jeff** [01:39:56] Then you join the CWA staff. What sort of assignments did you have there?

**Debbie Hayes** [01:40:01] At first they did not want me to have my old Local so I was assigned some, like Buffalo Sewer Authority, Local 1122 where I had some Verizon, Local 1133 where I did have the health care workers. Then it was determined that it didn't make sense for me to be doing work outside of the industry when I knew health care as well as I did. So they gave me an assignment that was all health care workers in upstate New York. I had the VNA [Visiting Nurses Association], Local 1168, and Local 1133. And then I had Arnot Ogden, a hospital in Elmira, and Saint Luke's Hospital in Utica. During those years, I was convinced they were trying to kill me because like my nursing job it was a huge assignment (laughs), and I was traveling and I just wanted to be able to do it right. As more staff came on, they split that assignment up a little bit. But basically from 1986 on, I became a full-time union representative, either as a Local president or as a staff representative. It's a hard transition, and I don't know if people realize how hard it is to go from a Local where you really feel like you are completely tied in to this group of people, to a position where you're pretty much functioning on your own. It's not like I didn't have co-workers because I did. But when it came to my assignment, it was me and the Locals. So that was a little bit of a tough transition. At the time I came on staff, Jerry was the area director in the Buffalo area office and Dave Palmer was the other staff representative that was there. So, like Jerry, I developed a very, very close personal and work relationship with Dave that really spanned all those years. I don't know if you know that Dave passed away last year. Did you know? Yeah.

**Jeff** [01:43:08] Yes, I know Dave. Wonderful guy.

**Debbie Hayes** [01:43:12] Yeah. We were just all heartbroken.

**Jeff** [01:43:16] Yes, yes. Quite a struggle at the end.

**Debbie Hayes** [01:43:20] It was just really hard. Yeah. But anyways, Dave and I were buddies and co-workers from the time he started servicing our Local as the staff representative while I was president through last year. He was a good man.

**Jeff** [01:43:48] He was. He was working for Erie County by the end, wasn't he?

**Debbie Hayes** [01:43:53] So this is the sad part with Dave. He worked for Erie County for about ten years, I want to say, and retired maybe in [20]21 or [20]22 and then immediately started with his health problems. So it was really sad to see him in his retirement years kind of struggle the way that he did.

**Jeff** [01:44:27] Okay, I don't want to digress too far. So, right now you're the area director. What all does that encompass? What is your area of responsibility now?

**Debbie Hayes** [01:44:40] So right now I have upstate New York except for Verizon. And then I have Connecticut and New England. The locals have really kind of consolidated so that there's one big Local in Connecticut, one big Local in New England. And then I just have from Albany up. There's a separate area director that does all of Verizon so all of that work is together. By and large in upstate New York I'm doing health care.

**Jeff** [01:45:26] Well, this two hours has flown by. Debbie G, do you have anything else you want to ask?

**Debbie Goldman** [01:45:33] I have some short and a little bit larger question. Hannah, do we have ten minutes or so to go on? Where does the Hayes in your name come from?

**Debbie Hayes** [01:45:51] That is my ex-husband's name. My maiden name was a problem for people to say and spell and so I just kept Hayes after I got divorced because it was easy and it was also my children's name, so I just kept it.

**Debbie Goldman** [01:46:14] What was your birth name?

**Debbie Hayes** [01:46:16] It was Banyí.

**Debbie Goldman** [01:46:22] That's a Hungarian name, I guess.

**Debbie Hayes** [01:46:23] Hungarian name? Yes.

**Debbie Goldman** [01:46:25] Okay. So you're not related to Jerry Hayes?

**Debbie Hayes** [01:46:28] I am not related. Which I have to say, when we were first working together, especially during this strike, was the question of the day. Are you related to Jerry? Tell them no, we're not related at all.

**Debbie Goldman** [01:46:46] What influence and impact did you and your Local have on the rest of CWA in terms of health care representation and organizing and then in terms of lobbying and political activism around health care reform?

**Debbie Hayes** [01:47:12] We encouraged and still encourage other CWA Locals to organize health care workers because it can be done by Locals that are in industries other than health care and we were the prime example of that. But I'll be honest with you, Debbie, I don't know how much health care organizing was done because of the work that we did. I know there are other health care workers in the national union but we don't have a council or the kind of work relationship that we do in District 1. So our health care workers in New York and New Jersey are more connected with one another than we are with health care workers in other parts of the country.

**Debbie Hayes** [01:48:29] We're always huge proponents for a national health plan or a New York State health plan. When you work in the industry, I think it's more clear than ever the amount of dollars that are not spent at the bedside that should be spent at the bedside and are spent in back offices, paying administrators and doing administrative work and insurance companies that just doesn't need to be spent. So we have always been firm advocates for a national health plan or state health plan. Politically and legislatively in New York state we have worked around no mandatory overtime for nurses, certain specific ratios in ICUs (intensive care units), transplant centers, burn units. But truly our biggest victory was in 2021 and the law that was passed in New York on clinical staffing committees [CSCs]. That is a lot of the work I'm doing right now. Since then, we've had to work to get these clinical staffing committees established in all of our New York state Locals that have healthcare workers in acute care facilities. Teach them what the law says and their roles and responsibilities on the clinical staffing committee and then go in and bargain what ratios we believe there should be when you're caring, providing direct patient care, whether it's at a bedside or in a procedure lab or in a clinic associated with the hospital. So I would say we've had small legislative victories along the way, but 2021 was definitely the biggest.

**Debbie Goldman** [01:51:04] And one hears now about the pressures from the insurance companies and the private equity ownership of so many health care facilities. The squeeze that this is putting on providers, meaning nurses, doctors, etc. o you think the fact that you have a geographic-wide unionization in Buffalo and this legislation you've gotten has served to make a difference, at least in your area, so that nurses and health care providers can actually deliver good care.

**Debbie Hayes** [01:51:45] I believe that we've taken significant steps in the right direction. But, we didn't cover Covid at all. What happened to us/healthcare workers during the COVID-19 epidemic could be a separate two-hour conversation about Covid and the effect that it had on health care workers in the facilities and then the industry as a whole. When it [Covid] first came into the facilities, people were terrified because all we knew was that if you got it, you were probably going to die and they were not clear on the mode of transmission and what they needed to do to protect the workers. And workers could not get the personal protective equipment that we believe they needed in the facilities. So people left, people retired, people went into other jobs. There is right now a severe health care worker shortage, not just in western New York but in all of New York and across the country. So while we were able at both Catholic Health System and Kaleida Health System to implement the new staffing/CSC law and while the law was being implemented, we were able to negotiate some incredible ratios. We haven't been able to recruit and retain people the way we should be able to actually meet the ratios. So our workers have experienced some improvements in some areas but definitely not what we need to see. When I was working on a med surg floor, we could have anywhere from 10 to 14 patients. Now on med surg floors we believe the ratio to provide good care should be one nurse for every four patients. And back in my day, you would have gall bladders and hernias and procedures done that are now done on outpatient basis. These folks never see the inside of a hospital. So the people who do get admitted are much sicker and require

much more hands-on care. It's a different population than it was when I was practicing. So it's a really complex picture right now. Neither the state of New York, the federal government is better, but they do not reimburse facilities dollar per dollar for the cost of the care that they provide. So the economics is always a struggle. Many, many hospitals in New York state are functioning with 30 or less days cash on hand. So we're really worried about making payroll and getting supplies and having the staff that we need to do the work. It's a pretty desperate situation right now.

**Debbie Goldman** [01:55:45] We could have a whole two hours on that and I'm sure you have many insights to share. I not going to go there. I have one last question and then I know Jeff will want to wrap it up. And maybe Hannah has some questions. When you were a Local president, I assume you had people of many different races and backgrounds in your Local as well as people who were LGBTQ+. Did you have equity committees? How did you promote equity both within the union and issues of [equitable] representation?

**Debbie Hayes** [01:56:39] Boy, I don't know. So you're right. We had different, races, ethnicities and LGBTQ issues. I don't know if we had a committee until the national implemented that all Locals should have these committees. I'm a little embarrassed to say that, but we were always very, very inclusive. We always made it clear in steward and other training that we do not discriminate against folks based on their skin color, their ethnicity, their gender, their gender preference, whether they're gay or straight. It was just a philosophy that we functioned under. I remember the first person and we were doing this back in the [19] 80s. So some of this discussion was not as open and out there and people weren't as accepting as they are or hopefully are now. But one of the guys that organized the second Buffalo General unit in 1985 was a gay man. I'll never forget the conversation that we had when he came out to me and I kind of knew before he told me. It wasn't a huge surprise when he told me that he was gay, but it was just this feeling of closeness and connectedness that he felt like I was someone that he could tell and that he felt like it was important for me to know that he was gay before he started telling other people. It was just always a part of who we were because of Michael, who we were and what we did. I just don't remember there ever being any issue, any discriminatory problems. And again with my daughters, Mike and Andy would come over and help us put up our Christmas lights. So to my daughters, it was just always Mike and Andy. It's just from the time they were little who they knew, Mike and Andy. So. I just don't ever remember having specific committees or having to deal with the specific problems.

**Jeff** [02:00:06] Hannah, do you have anything you want to ask.

**Hannah** [02:00:10] Sure. Debbie, I apologize if I missed this, but how old were you the year that you got married, got pregnant, and went on strike?

**Debbie Hayes** [02:00:21] I was 26.

**Hannah** [02:00:28] Wow. So you talked about that time as being a time of real struggle. And I'm wondering. It seems almost like a coming of age, both for you and for the workers. What were the biggest lessons that you learned in that period of time?

**Debbie Hayes** [02:00:44] I think the biggest lesson I learned during that time, Hannah, was that you don't know how strong you are until you need to tap into that strength. Most people who know me say, oh, Debbie, she's so nice and she's quiet and she's not the type of person that we would imagine standing up there in front of a group of a thousand people with fists in the air, talking about

the fight we were in. And when we went on strike, none of us knew what to expect. But what we learned is that we were all stronger than we thought we were. And that together, pooling that strength together, we couldn't be beat. I think the way that you said it was really very eloquent because I think you're right. It was like a coming of age. There were so many of us that were young. We're fresh from either college or nursing school. We didn't know a lot at those tender ages. We had some life experience, but not a lot. And we were just all kind of forging ahead together. Again, the lessons we learned about -- I'm trying to think the right way to say it -- just kind of about humanity and what people's struggles really are like and the kind of support that people really did need and what our work really would be just kind of grew and off we went.

**Hannah** [02:03:04] Thank you. I'm wondering if there's maybe a moment or a story you have from that time where you kind of had to find that strength. Is there anything that you can think of? Like maybe one specific moment in time.

**Debbie Hayes** [02:03:23] So this is one of the darker moments. It was right after the strike ended. And my ex-husband was a real problem during the strike. Like I said, it was a very abusive relationship and I was supposed to go to the union office after I got out of work and we only had one car. He wouldn't let me drive the car to work so he picked me up. And then I said, I have to go to the union office and he wouldn't let me go. He said, you worked all day. You're coming home. I said, I have to go to the office. I have people waiting for me. And I just thought it was two people waiting for me. So we went home and we had this terrible exchange. At one point he said, go ahead, take the car and go. But I couldn't because I was crying and I was a mess and was already an hour too late. I figured people would go home. So a little later, my doorbell rang and I went downstairs and there was a note from the executive board and this woman that I was supposed to meet with one-on-one had called the board meeting, which I didn't know about, and they waited for me and I didn't come. So they sent me this letter about, now that the strike is over, you're not going to fall down on the job. You better step up. There was one person who didn't sign it was this guy that was on the bargaining committee, Mike Sullivan. And none of the rest of them watched what I went through during the strike and could put two and two together. But Mike did. He knew what I was going through at home. He wouldn't sign his name and he was pretty disgusted with the rest of the crew for sending the letter they did. But talk about an awakening like an eye-opening moment. It was one of the most awful moments during that stretch. But boy, did it get my attention. It absolutely made me realize that I was going to be in a struggle and it was going to be a struggle to do the job I was elected to do and work in the hospital at that time and then deal with this man that I was married to. From that day on, I never put myself in a position where he was going to tell me what I could or couldn't do related to work. There were many high moments, but that was one of the low ones.

**Hannah** [02:07:19] Did you and Mike Sullivan continue to have a good relationship after that?

**Debbie Hayes** [02:07:24] We did, and I saw him again last year for the first time in many years. Like I said, I just love him to death. He always call me Prez and he still calls me Prez. When we communicate on Facebook, he always says, hey, Prez. And that's the relationship that we have. He worked in the community mental health building and he looked like a biker, he didn't look like a nurse. He had long, scraggly hair and a scraggly beard and he dressed in black and wore black boots and he had a big chain on his wallet. That was just Mike, and I'll never forget him for the work that he did and the relationship he built. But I'll never forget him for that moment.

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**Jeff** [02:08:26] Is he the guy that addressed the heckler as well?

**Debbie Hayes** [02:08:29] Yup.

**Jeff** [02:08:30] Yes. Okay.

**Debbie Hayes** [02:08:31] Yeah. He did. Mike always had my back.

**Jeff** [02:08:37] Sounds like it.

**Hannah** [02:08:40] Thank you for sharing.

**Jeff** [02:08:41] Like I said this two hours has just blown by you. We asked you for two hours. You've given us more. I got a feeling we just scratched the surface with a number of topics. I'd love to have a conversation about dealing with Covid in the hospitals and what that must have been like. But thanks again for agreeing to do this with us. It's just been a real pleasure. I can't thank you enough.

**Debbie Hayes** [02:09:12] Well, like I said as we started, I am really honored that you thought to include me in this project and I can't wait to read the transcript. If there is any time where you feel like you need additional information or there's any of these other topics that either myself or other people in the Local can help with, do not hesitate to reach out because I just feel like especially with our younger members, it's so important for them to understand the history and the struggle that went into getting the wages and benefits that we all earn and deserve now. And, these are these projects that you're doing are just so important. So thank you for the opportunity.

**Jeff** [02:10:12] Well you've encapsulated our motivation with this. That's really what we're trying to do here is just capture that history so that it doesn't get lost for the ages. So thanks for being a part of that. And thanks for being such a great contributor to our union. I feel so fortunate to know you and to have had this opportunity to spend these couple of hours like I said at the outset. You're a legend within CWA, whether you know that or not. Everybody knows who Debbie Hayes is and what she's done up in Buffalo, New York. So, thanks for expanding on that.

**Debbie Hayes** [02:10:50] Thank you very much, folks. And like I said, don't hesitate if there's anything else I can do or we can do from up here, don't hesitate to reach out.