

CWA Oral History Project Transcript

Interviewee: Hinton, Linda

Interviewer(s): McKerley, John, and Jeff Rechenbach

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Linda Hinton Interview – August 16, 2023

- JM: Okay, this is John McKerley, the CWA Oral History Project interviewer. And who am I here with?
- LH: My name is Linda Hinton and I am at CWA offices in District 4, 20525 Center Ridge Road, Rocky River [Ohio]. And today is August the 16, 2023.
- JM: Okay, great. Thanks. Alright, so as warned off the recorder, these are, well as actually not warned off the recorder--this is one of the things I should [00:00:30] have said--is that these are biographical interviews, which means we always begin at the beginning with when and where you were born.
- LH: I was born in Columbus, Ohio, September 18, 1951.
- JM: Okay. Can you tell me something about your parents? Who are they? Who were they?
- LH: Yes. My parents were David and Doris Jean [sic] Hinton, and my mom was a factory worker for UAW and my dad was a steelworker.
- JM: Okay. [00:01:00] So what part of Columbus did you grow up in?
- LH: The south side of Columbus.
- JM: Can you describe that neighborhood? What was it like in the 1950s?
- LH: Sure. It was a pretty mixed neighborhood and very diverse. We all got along and everybody [00:01:30] was just--it was really like a village from what people say. For me growing up, I would play with, go with, and my parents would help out with all different neighbors and sometimes they would be at school functions that I went with and whether that was a Caucasian household, their parents might represent me and vice versa. So it was pretty mixed.
- JM: [00:02:00] Well, and I don't know if you've ever come across it before, but there's a semi-famous book from the nineties called *Alabama North*, that's about the ties between the Black community in Cleveland and Alabama. Where'd your folks come from?
- LH: Oh, they came from a small town. My mom did. Rendville, Ohio, and it was a mining town, but my dad was here in Columbus. He grew up in Columbus.
- JM: [00:02:30] So were there Mine Workers' union connections in the family?
- LH: Oh, absolutely, absolutely. My great-grandfather was actually in the mines. And then my brother--youngest brother--worked in the mines as well. So my grandmother, she lived in Rendville most of her life. And so I'd go down there for the summer [00:03:00] to stay. Sometimes miners would be there. Her home was

sort of the home that miners came to. And so that probably had a big effect on me seeing that miners went to work and hopefully they came home. And so, if they didn't, people rallied at her house. And seeing all of that really helped me.

JM: Yeah. Okay. Well, so [00:03:30] let me just again, kind of sketch things out and make sure that I understand and then maybe you can help me fill in the pieces here. So growing up in a mixed community--African Americans and whites--were there lots of say second generation immigrants or where did the [00:04:00] white folks that were your neighbors come from?

LH: No, most of them were right there in Ohio, in Columbus and all of that. Yeah, I mean, it was just one family. It really didn't get into all of that back then.

JM: Okay. Well, so let's just turn to education for just a second. So what schools did you go to there in the 1950s, [00:04:30] 1960s?

LH: I went to Heyl [unclear] Elementary School, Mohawk Junior High School, and then I graduated from South High School in '69.

JM: Okay. Okay. Well, okay, maybe the question that I'll follow up with, so Columbus obviously has the university there, but it also sounds like it had a significant industrial side to it. What was it like to grow up in this place that [00:05:00] had these different identities, these different poles I guess maybe if you will, that defined what it meant to live in Columbus?

LH: For me, growing up it was more of, we lived in the south side, but part of the south side, there was a section called German Village, and that was sort of elite, if you will. And we were on [00:05:30] the opposite side of the street of the elite, but we were just really very regular folks. We used to be part of German Village and then they literally moved the sign. So it was sort of a line. That was German Village, and then [that was] the south side. But German village is on the south side. <laughs>

JM: [00:06:00] Right, right. Well, did that have--so I'll just give some context. So my family's from Birmingham, Alabama, and that's a town of these kind of micro neighborhoods, but obviously it's also a town of very segregated micro neighborhoods where you would have the white section that might have even the same name as the black section, but it didn't have city sewers, say for example, the black section, but the white section would. This moving of [00:06:30] the sign, did it have a kind of material consequences, or was this more about status of here's the high status area, here's the low status area?

LH: More status, more of status. The homes over in German Village while smaller than some of our homes on the south side, resources would put into that area. So they were higher end, smaller homes really than [00:07:00] what was happening on the south side.

JM: Well, so I'll come back to the union piece for a second. What did it [00:07:30] mean materially for you growing up? Were you in a context in which you had neighbors who were in service sector jobs, say for example, that struggled to get by compared to say the unionized households that were able to draw on the power of those strong UAW contracts and things like that? Was that evident to you as a kid growing up?

LH: No, not as a kid growing up. I can say--well, I guess [00:08:00] I should say that while my parents, both of my parents were union, my mom primarily raised it [sic]. They had gotten a divorce. And so my mom was a single mom and there were four of us. And because of her job, she was able to provide for us a number of things. I mean, we didn't really want for anything. And a lot of things that [00:08:30] we saw other people have, we were able to get that too. In school, she insisted all of us play some sort of instrument. She felt very much that that had a lot to do with helping build character. And probably my most famous or dear memory for me was wanting to play violin. And she said, okay, well we need [00:09:00] to make this happen. And she did. I got a very *good* violin from that. And so it was really helpful and all four of us played some sort of instrument and so that really was a family unit for us.

JM: You were all four were able to bond over these--?

LH: Oh yeah. Yeah. We had to bond. We could argue all day long and at the end of the day before we went to bed, we had to tell each other, siblings, I love you, [00:09:30] and you just sort let it go. I mean, that's always stuck with us and we do that to this day. Even I talk to my brothers all the time--my sister's deceased. But yeah, we still do.

JM: Okay.

JM: Well, so let's move the story forward a little bit. Or, actually, hold on, I'm going to ask one more question along these lines, and I think you've touched on it, but I am going to try to put a point on it. So [00:10:00] oftentimes one of the reasons that I stick around in this early part of people's lives so much is that people who have careers like yours oftentimes there's these, we think of them as "union values," and sometimes those are values that are passed on, "I sat on grandma's knee or my mother's knee or father's knee and then was taught, never to cross a picket line." These kinds of--they were imparted from person to person within a union household. [00:10:30] But sometimes they happen on the playground, sometimes they happen even around conflict, around not wanting to be bullied or making this connection between yourself and others and wanting to care for others. Do you have--whether it fits in any of those categories or whether it is something else--does any of that resonate with you?

LH: [00:11:00] Yeah, I would say, especially from my grandmother being in a mining town. I mean, for her it was always being able to try to be there to help someone

else in need. And that's what I saw growing up when I'd be there in the summers. And she was there and her house was just *the* house. And so it wasn't about your need, it was about helping someone else. And [00:11:30] my mom instilled that as well. But from my grandmother, both of my grandmothers actually, that's one thing that I did learn: to help others.

JM: Yeah. Well, again, thank you for playing that game with me.

LH: Sure.

JM: To come back to education then, let's see, you're born in [19]51, so you're graduating from high school in the late 1960s. What did you see as you're starting to think [00:12:00] about work? What did you see as your opportunities there in the late 1960s? What did you start to do first?

LH: Well, I thought that I wanted to go into some sort of law or something for a minute. And, quite honestly, by the time I got in high school, things changed and I really didn't know what I was going to do. And all during high school, you prepare yourself for going into college [00:12:30] for what have you. And then I just changed my mind about what I wanted to do. I wanted to work, and my mom said, "That's okay, you can go to work, but you've got to do something. You don't just graduate and sit at home." So that's really how I ended up coming to the phone company was because she said the phone company's hiring. I was like, okay. It wasn't anything that I had planned to do, but [00:13:00] I took court reporting for a little while. I thought that would be interesting. And it was for the short time I was in there, but it really wasn't a passion.

JM: What changed?

LH: That I could not tell you. Same question my mom had asked. <laughs> I don't know. I just decided that wasn't [00:13:30] what I wanted to do. And she said, "Well, the phone company's hiring." Ohio Bell at the time. And so I went in and they were hiring for operators. "You're going to be here three, four years," at the time, they used to say, and of course I said, yes, I wanted the job, so I retired from AT&T. <laughs> So yeah--for me--it ended up being [00:14:00] a good career move. I am doing something that I absolutely love, and I sort of knew that right off the bat walking in. So I couldn't tell you what changed my mind.

JM: Okay. So let's explore that world. So what was that first job? What did you start doing when you got there?

LH: I was an operator on the cord board [sic] and I loved it. [00:14:30] Only thing I didn't like about it sometimes were the hours, because coming in new, of course you didn't have any seniority, so you had all the holidays and the night shifts and all of that. But I love the people. I love talking to folks that would call in, and I got, quite honestly, I got involved in the union, like, day one. It was sort of a

natural fit for me. And [00:15:00] I had a chief operator who was an officer in the local [who] came up to me and started talking: “You come to the union meeting?” “Oh, of course.” And so I was just right in. It's not like a big story, but it just naturally happened. I just felt comfortable, like this was what I was supposed to be doing. This is something I could do.

JM: Okay. Well, and I'm going to come back to that, but I want to--since [00:15:30] the days of cord boards have left us behind, can you take us back? Can you tell us, even just imagine what the room was like and what it looked like, what it smelled like, what it felt like to hold the cables. Give us as much detail as you can about what it was like to do that job.

LH: Well, you were all sitting [00:16:00] in a row, first of all, and I can remember coming in and--you could sit anywhere, you didn't have any assigned seats--but some of the more senior—who, at the time I thought was old, and now that I'm old, I understand they weren't old--but they had certain seats that they want to sit in. So you'd come in, and I was new, I saw an open seat, I sat down. And somebody said, [00:16:30] a young woman said, “Those are our seats.” I'm like, “Well, I didn't see any name,” or “They didn't have any assigned seats.” “Well, these are our seats.” “Okay.” So you just got up and you moved.

But it was just really interesting as far as calls coming in and there was a cord on the table, and as a call came in, a light would light up and you picked up the cord. And then, of course, depending upon what the request [00:17:00] was, you had to plug it into another end, is what happened. And it was just fascinating to me the number of people that call in and some of the questions they would ask you and all of that.

And just the people--the atmosphere was usually pretty good. One of the things that I didn't like was you had to put up a card if you wanted to step out and go to the restroom. So that [00:17:30] was not fun. And for a young person you wanted to do something about it, but we'd have chatter about that. But it was just nice having--you'd have the GMs—managers--sitting in the front of the room. You also had a manager that would walk up and down behind you making sure that you were working all the time, productivity and all of that.

But overall, [00:18:00] it really was a good atmosphere with your coworkers in there, all doing the same thing. And depending on your hours, you'd go out for break or if you had split shifts, you could actually leave the building and come back. So it was nice.

JM: Okay. I want to stay with the technology for just one second, then I promise I'm going to move to some of these other themes. So [00:18:30] I was born in 1975, so please be patient with me. So let's say somebody in 1970 picks up the phone and is going to call their mother on Mother's Day. But they live in the same town. They live in Columbus, so they're just calling across town. Does that call get

routed through your office and you're needing to still make that connection? Or [00:19:00] are the calls that are coming to you distinct from that kind of scenario?

LH: Oh, it could, but most of them were long distance then long distance. We also had directory assistance, where someone's just calling in looking for a business, then they would hook them up to the business. And that was on another side. I did not do directory. I did long distance. I was in what they call the long distance office.

JM: So again, okay, so here's a world that I have some familiarity with because it still existed when I was [00:19:30] in the 1980s. So you pick up the phone, you hit zero, and that would take you to directory assistance. And that was another office. You say?

LH: Four-one-one. 411 was directory. Yeah, zero would get you into our office.

JM: Okay. And then you would say, "I want to call my grandmother in New York City," and then you would make those connections? Okay.

LH: There was all different type of things. We'd have calls [00:20:00] from jail, just simply jail calls that you would do. And sometimes there would be coin calls when we had payphones, which is a department I worked in for a little while. And so you just had to listen to--each coin had a different sound--and you would listen to that sound and what have you. So it was interesting.

JM: That's interesting. So tell me more about that. What do you mean? Each coin had a different sound?

LH: Well, the quarter would--I don't remember what the sounds were now--but each [00:20:30] coin would have a different sound. So you would know what they put in. If the call was a dollar, let's say, and they were trying to get by with something, they dropped a couple coins. Well, no, that's not right. You would know what the amount was they dropped in. So it was interesting.

JM: Yeah, that's fascinating though. It's a skill that I had no idea it was part of this. So you'd have to know what each one sounded like because you were the one who was making the connection. And so it wasn't that the machine [00:21:00] was recognizing the proper coinage had been dropped in, it was you and your ears that were making that--

LH: Well, I am sure there was something, and I may not have known that, but I'm sure that the technology would know that as well. But we did. We would know that too, as an operator.

JM: That's fascinating. Okay, so before we turn to the union per se, I want to turn back to this other piece—the coworkers. [00:21:30] So it sounds like there was maybe just a little bit of a hierarchy in the sense of there was the people who had been

there longer, younger people walk in and then they've got a kind of acculturate to it. And then did you find that there [00:22:00] were older women or just other coworkers who took you under their wing and who were sort of acted as mentors in the workspace, sort of showing you the ropes?

LH: Oh, absolutely, absolutely. Matter of fact, the person that asked me to come to the union meeting was--she was an operator as well--and that's what she did. She'd walk up to you--and it's one of the things that I learned [00:22:30] coming up and I had never forgotten--that is, she walked up and said, "Hi, my name is Mary." She happened to be an officer in the union--in the local--and introduced herself and what have you, and just sort of had conversation with you, which is I think something that needs to happen all the time to keep people engaged.

JM: And what was the union density in your shop? [00:23:00] I mean, did almost everybody join?

LH: Almost everyone at that time, yes.

JM: Okay. And this was in the pre agency shop days, right? So, if somebody was going to join, people would need to have conversations like this?

LH: No, we talked to folks, but it was closed then.

JM: [00:23:30] Okay, well then let's just use that as a transition point then. So when you started going to--we talked about how you had this connection and started going to union meetings. What did you find? What did it mean to be a member of the union here in what, the late 1960s, early 1970s?

LH: Well, I can only speak from my local [00:24:00] in Columbus, and it was local 4310, and it was very--in my opinion, when I first started--it was very clique-ish. And so you had a group of folks that came to the union meeting and what they said went, and that's sort of the way things went along. And just coming in, if you questioned, sometimes you'd get the side eye, [00:24:30] "What are you doing? Why are you questioning?" But it started out that way, but very quickly with new people coming in, I think it gave us an opportunity to change the dynamics of how things were run. And that's sort of what we did.

JM: Yeah. Well, okay, so that's another way to talk across these two things. You mentioned, I think that when you first started, the people said, well, you'll be [00:25:00] here 2, 3, 4 years or whatever. So what was the turnover when you got there? Were people coming in and out all the time?

LH: Not really. No. A number of people that I started with sort of retired before I did, or right around the time I did. So a lot of us went in different directions. We didn't stay in operator services. I had several jobs outside--once I left operator services, you could transfer [00:25:30] of course, and I transferred to other jobs and they



did too. So I sort of lost connection, but a lot of people did stay. I left operator services and went to the coin department, which was a fascinating job as well. It was interesting. It was just interesting to see that what you did affected the collectors who were outside collecting the coins. I was in the key department and those routes become very clear [00:26:00] about how they're doing their routes. And so I worked there and I also worked what we call the fraud desk as a service rep and someone trying to get a phone in that maybe had a previous bill or trying to put the phone in their dog's name. So I loved all that and I felt like I was Columbo. "I gotcha." And so that was actually a [00:26:30] fun job. So I was a service rep in the residential office at the time that I retired from the phone company.

JM: Well, I want to hit a couple of those different pieces, but I want to stay with the operators for a second. So as we know, the operator work during this period is almost exclusively female, right?

LH: Uh-huh.

JM: Was part of this assumption that people wouldn't stay very long was this because [00:27:00] of the expectation that people would get married and either leave voluntarily or sort of be nudged out? How did that work in terms of, I mean, just sort of frankly gender discrimination in the work?

LH: Now, I don't know that it was so much that as just that--I think the job itself--people [were] just used to, for the most part, hearing a woman's voice when they called operator [00:27:30] services. So it sort of was like that was a woman's job, but I can't really say that it was based on that. I mean, I think that's just what people thought it was--a women's job. There actually was two locals. I was in one local and folks would say--and still do sometimes--our local, the women's local, because we represented mostly [00:28:00] inside workers, which primarily were women. And then the other local was the man's local because they had the technicians. So I'd say we were the better local, but that's what I think happened there.

JM: Okay. Well, and what about race? How did it break out?

LH: There wasn't that many people of color when I first [00:28:30] started, but it did eventually change, but it was not that many people of color when I first went in.

JM: Did you feel like you were in a--was it a welcoming environment in terms of race when you got there?

LH: Yes, yes, it was. And some of that might have just been my upbringing because [00:29:00] while I've experienced some racism coming from where in Rendville was mixed, so I guess I just didn't really think about it when I first started the phone company, just like I went there because I was supposed to get a job. I went

in, did my job, talked to people, and I've always had the ability to get along with most anybody. [00:29:30] So that really wasn't a problem there.

JM: Yeah, so you didn't feel like part of the cliquishness didn't overlap with the race?

LH: Yeah, no, no, not for me. I can't say that.

JM: Gotcha. Well, okay, well, so as you start to move into these other jobs, this also was in the era where the phone company was—and the union too--were [00:30:00] being pushed by inside and outside forces to break down some of these barriers, these gender barriers, race barriers. Were those new spaces that you were going into, were they also sort of traditionally female jobs or was there any kind of barrier breaking that was going on at the same time?

LH: They're mostly female jobs that I was in. There were a few men and service reps, and some of those [00:30:30] [who] were there at the time that I recall would've been like—if they had job accommodation where they maybe have gotten something hurt or just a job accommodation really. But it still was primarily women. And even when operator services was still here, here in Cleveland, one of the offices I went to there were some men that were in [00:31:00] there and it was because of their office—the garage closing or something like that. And they were very, very disgruntled being an operator. The term “operator,” for some, seems to be “less than.” I don't think they understood the job. On any given day, an operator at the time would handle about 1100 calls. [00:31:30] And so people didn't realize that. And for a couple of men that I talked to here in Cleveland, one, they didn't know that. They were like, well, “We don't like having to ask to go to the bathroom,” and “Why do we have all these calls?” So I mean, just talking through that, but it was I think an eyeopener. And I often said, I think everyone should have been an operator—starting—so that they can see that this is what you have in this [00:32:00] limited time, and it really is meaningful, valuable work.

JM: Well, it makes me wonder, in some workplaces you have this situation in which, especially in these situations where there's “female work,” “male work,” and then these sort of in-between jobs—that during this period you have situations in [00:32:30] which men, like say they get to the point where they're in their forties and their fifties and things start to hurt and they start to look to bid into these jobs where they can say, sit more or be inside more because they just feel like it's, again, sort of “easier” work. Did you find that with people who had say done some of the repair or line work or whatever, who were looking [00:33:00] to come back inside as they got older? Was that part of this process at all?

LH: No, no. Ones that were coming into operator services was basically, this is the job or you have none. So no, it wasn't that they were looking for—I can't say that I know anybody that was actually *looking* for an inside job that came from the outside.

JM: Okay, okay. Right. Everyone was—they were always going out?

LH: Trying to, right.

JM: [00:33:30] Okay. Well, let's see. So I think the fraud job is a new workspace that we don't have documented yet. And so could you work me through that a little bit? The Colombo aspect is pretty interesting.

LH: Oh, yes, [00:34:00] it really is. Unfortunately, folks would have their phone turned off, or they'd try to get new service, and we had to—we'd get flagged and they'd go, well, this account, there seems to be another account maybe at this address, or an account that has a balance, can you check it out? And so it was our job to, one, make sure that it was a new customer—it wasn't the same customer. And, the example I used before, I mean, we really [00:34:30] would find people that just tried to put it in their pet's name and their two-year-old's name and stuff like that, or if they owed the bill, getting that paid before you start new service and the deposits and all of that. So that's what it was, just fraud investigation mostly. And that was very interesting. Outside of being an operator, that probably was one of my [00:35:00] favorite jobs at the phone company.

JM: These other jobs were they a step up in the sense that they were both better paying, and—did they feel, it sounds like maybe they were also, they had a little less, especially in the fraud department, it seems like it doesn't make any sense to have somebody just standing over your shoulder. It sounds like a job that's maybe a little bit more independent. Was that also the trajectory you were on? Looking for a little bit more independence on the job [00:35:30] and maybe a little more money?

LH: I could say making more money. The other, I couldn't say that. Because it just didn't really bother me. I mean, I just did my job. I just did my job. And as I got more involved with the union becoming a steward and all of that, then I found that I think part of my responsibility was to make sure that people *weren't* being harassed on the job for [00:36:00] petty things, especially in operator services. But even in the other jobs, you still had supervision. Because, even as a service rep, the manager still sat in the office. Far be that the workers just do their work. They had to sit in the office. But it wasn't as much supervision as operator services. The key room probably was the least [00:36:30] controlling as far as managers. They were there in the building because it was a smaller operation for the key room.

And we would just do our jobs. We knew how critical it was making sure—what sounds petty, it wasn't—to make sure that those keys were in the right order for that technician that was going out there. And one of the things that we did that was successful that I actually [00:37:00] suggested was that we go out, those of us who work the key room, [we] happen to be all women, that we actually go out with a technician and that they sit in with us so that they could see what we do

and what happens when you bring those keys back in at the time. And if they weren't in the right order, what it caused for us. And then we got to see what it caused for them if we didn't [00:37:30] do our job on the inside. And that was really very helpful. I was glad to see that—the work—on both sides.

So I wouldn't want to do their job. I never wanted to be an outside person to do that. I mean, they went into some rather interesting places and all of that. And so that was helpful for me to see that. But [00:38:00] no, but that was the least, probably supervised, if you will, that we had. But as a service rep, you were still supervised. They still sort of walked around a little bit, listening to you on calls and what have you. So if they heard something that they thought maybe you could have said a little better, you might get talked to or something like that. But usually you worked in cubicles, [00:38:30] so we were in cubicles of four, and you all could sort of hear each other. And the one thing, especially when we worked fraud, in our cubicle, you became very good friends—because we had one customer one day, and the other person would get the same customer the next day trying to do something else. And we all sort of knew that. So you had that bond there. And sometimes I think as a steward, you'd hear some [00:39:00] things and go like, “You know, you might've wanted to say that a little different.”

But when we were in—going back to operator services—and I still say that today, even for our clerical folks that are out here, it's like you have to remember that this is our client or a customer, our members calling in. And so that could be the first voice or person that they're hearing [00:39:30] from our union. So that needs to be pleasant and they need to do that. So, in operator services, “the customer should always hear you smile.” That's what we were trained in. I still remember that today. So it's like, “I don't hear the smile in your voice.” [laughs] I just look at you. Okay. Yeah.

JM: Okay. Well, so that though brings me to [00:40:00] one of these questions that I'm actually going to ask again and again, and it's what I'm starting to call my “saying yes” question. And so we've already gotten one of those, which is you come to a unionized workplace, you say yes to being a member, but then somebody invites you to be—or you decide that you're going to pursue—being a steward. And that takes a certain degree of commitment to say, “I'm going to say [00:40:30] yes to this, and I know that it comes with additional responsibilities, but this is important to me.” And so I'm always wondering, why say yes to that? What did it mean to you to do that?

LH: It was another way of helping people. I mean, it goes back to my grandmother about it shouldn't always be about you and you should always, if you have the ability and the opportunity to help others, to try to do that. And so [00:41:00] it was just a natural thing for me. I knew that it was union when I went to even apply, I actually knew that they were union. And so, as I was thinking about this, I thought probably in the back of my mind, I knew I was going to be involved in the union somehow. I didn't realize that my career would be a union activist all

the time. [00:41:30] I don't think at that time I thought that. But it was clear to me pretty soon that this was work that I knew that I would love and enjoy doing. So it was very easy for me to of course say, "Yes, I'll come to a union meeting," and then be involved. And so that involvement started with getting on committees, and the particular person that asked me to come to the union meeting [00:42:00] certainly pushed.

JM: That's the thing about being a steward, right? Is that then you're charged with representing members and you're in this role where you got to push back sometimes on the boss. And so I'm just curious, what did you discover about both, whether it's when handling grievances about what the needs of the coworkers were, but also maybe [00:42:30] about yourself as you step into that role where you're not just an employee, but also someone who represents other workers?

LH: Well, I think I realized that I had to listen. That is the main thing that I learned. I've learned that through a number of people. And again, I'll go back to my grandmother. You don't always have to say something. [00:43:00] Sometimes you just need to listen, and you will find out a lot by just listening. So I learned that very quickly when I became a steward that I needed to listen. And you also need to make the person that's bringing the complaint to you feel that you really hear them. And so I always tried to do that. And I think I did that, and [00:43:30] hopefully I still continue to do that, listen to folks. But I learned being a steward that I did have the ability to help make some change. Not always successful at what I was trying to do, but I learned that about myself—that I could do it. And so that in itself lends a little bit of confidence [00:44:00] to what you're doing and the ability to help bring people together as a steward too, because sometimes you needed, obviously you needed your coworkers to stand up with you. And so the ability to talk with them and get them to say, "Yes, this is our position, this is what we're going to do." And so I learned that about myself.

JM: [00:44:30] Okay. Well, are there any stories that really stand out to you? This was the big grievance that either you are really proud of or something you learned from? Or were there moments where you didn't go through the grievance process but instead found some other way to get what you needed done?

LH: Oh Lord. Well, not really. I mean, there's just so many. [00:45:00] One grievance that we had—and actually I was the local president at the time—was in the service rep group. We were told in the summer that we could not wear any type of shorts or skorts that sort of looked like just a skirt. And so we [00:45:30] took issue with that. And so when we had the grievance, we had all of our stewards that were there. And the manager at the time was—different. He was just very strict. And so we all came in skorts, and that just really created havoc in there. And so it was fun. So we won our issue. And so they just let it drop. It was, "Just wear what you want." But [00:46:00] that was fun. That was a fun activity. And that was something that we got everybody to do that day. People came in these

skorts. I mean, we had pictures of what a skort looked like. It just looked like a skirt.

It sounds silly, but it really meant a lot to the workers and to the work group. So that's what was important—is that they all stuck together. And then back then we [00:46:30] were able to walk out—strike really. And so we had a lot of those different issues. I can't remember all of them, but I think when you're able to get the group together like that, sometimes that's what they need to see is that collective action *can* make a difference. And some things seem—I remember we got teased about that from by a few people. I don't want to mention who. [00:47:00] But for the work group, that was important to them. And it was important to me because it was so silly. You just didn't even make any sense. We're not going to go tell you men what kind of tie you have to wear that day. It all worked out.

JM: That's a brilliant story. That's a beautiful story. That's exactly the kind of story I was thinking you would tell.

LH: It was fun. I couldn't believe we had to do [00:47:30] that, but it was fun. Yeah, it was fun. I don't know I'd do it today, but it was fun.

JM: So then I don't think I'm going to get a better story than that. So let's turn to the next, “Why do you say yes?” question, which is, so you said that that took place while you were president of the local. So how did you become president of the local?

LH: Well, I had been to a number of union meetings and just some things were going on within [00:48:00] AT&T at the time, or Ohio Bell and all that, at the time. And just a group of us didn't like the direction that our local was going in and handling things. And so you can sit back and complain or you can get involved and try to make a change. And, collectively, we made a decision that we would run somebody for president and that was going to be me. And [00:48:30] we ran on a slate with some other folks. I ran on a slate with some other folks, but the goal was to get the presidency. And so we strategically said, we know we're not going to get all four of these spots. This is the spot we want, so this is what we're going to do to try to get there. And we did. I ran for office [00:49:00] to be president, but I was vice president first, and so it was—there I was.

JM: Okay. Well, so let's step back for a second just to make sure that there's a few things that I want to make sure we get on the record. So what year was it that you ran for president?

LH: Gosh, I'd have to look. I think I was president in '84 maybe.

- JM: Okay. Yeah. Well, so obviously [00:49:30] that's—were the things that you were concerned about, were they connected to the changes that were associated with the breakup at the Bell system, or was it something else?
- LH: Oh, it was a little bit of both. I mean, I think it was just overall workplace issues that we were having and in different departments, and nothing disparaging about the other officers. It was just that we thought we, we could do it better. We thought we could address *issues* better for [00:50:00] the workers. So that's basically what it was.
- JM: I'll just push one more time because I'm trying to get as much detail—I mean, did specific issues really stand out to you? “We need the presidency so that we can address issue X or issue Y.”
- LH: I can't think of anything right now that was a specific issue. I mean, I know we had a number of issues going on at the time. [00:50:30] I just really can't right at the moment. I'll have to think about that.
- JM: Well, okay, so one more question though. It sounds like there might be a story here, so correct me if I'm wrong. So your local is made up of several different offices. So there are multiple offices, and you, of course, worked in one. And so you need to be able to coordinate in order to win this election, you've got to be able to coordinate with workers who you might not work with on a daily basis across multiple offices. [00:51:00] How did you build that support? How did you actually let people know who you were and build the voting base internally that made you successful?
- LH: Had to look at each office. And I remember having at least one, if not two people who were on my campaign, if you will, from each office. And some of those were stewards, some of them were not, and [00:51:30] sort of breaking down the work group—who was in the work group. So you had to break them down to see, run it sort of like an organizing campaign, who you have, who you don't have, who you need to get. And that was the key is just strategically going through the offices, knowing who's there and having someone in each of those offices that would support you and the issues that you're working on and what have you.
- JM: [00:52:00] So the other thing that I think is interesting in terms of what I would call periodization as a historian, is that since you said that the skort-on-boss, this walk-in all in skorts, that happened after 1984. So there's still these sort of battles over—you think about the sort of battles over miniskirts and things like that that are happening in the late sixties, early seventies. These things don't go away. They're [00:52:30] still happening here in the late 1980s, right?
- LH: Yeah. Right.
- JM: Okay.

- LH: That manager wasn't there too much longer after that.
- JM: I understand.
- LH: I'm not saying we had anything to do with that. I'm just saying he wasn't there too much longer.
- JM: Well, before we get into you being president though, I do want to ask a little bit more about divestiture and the [00:53:00] impact that had on you and your coworkers and your local. Do you remember things that really stand out in terms of the impact that it had on you?
- LH: Well, yeah. I mean, we did lose some members who went to Long Lines AT&T and some of those folks were members in our local. And even back when I was an operator, folks went from—we were [00:53:30] on the cord board, and then when it went to TSPS [Traffic Service Position System?], I believe was the technical name, they went over and I didn't stay with—I didn't want to do that. That's how I went to the coin department, quite honestly, because I wanted to stay with the cord board. I loved that job, and it was going to be—I'm not a techno person, and so I didn't want to [00:54:00] do all that.
- JM: Could you give me the acronym one more time? TSPS?
- LH: Yes. It was TSPS, but I don't remember what the acronym stand for. I'll have to look that up. It was just more—it wasn't the cord board. It was just, it's all touchy feely stuff. And I didn't like all that. I wanted old school cord board. That's what I knew. [00:54:30] That's what I liked. And I didn't want to go to the new system. And I understand things need to change. They're not going to stay that way. But I didn't have to go there and had the ability to transfer. So that's what I did.
- JM: I know we're going back in time here, but I'm just really curious at what time they ripped out the old cord boards. What about when did that happen?
- LH: I don't remember. [00:55:00] I don't remember tell you the truth.
- JM: But maybe it's like sometime in the late seventies?
- LH: That could have been. I don't remember. I'm bad on dates. I'm sorry.
- JM: No, but just the fact that it happens during your time I think is really pretty fascinating.
- LH: [00:55:30] You're making me feel old.
- JM: Well, no, I'm sorry. I mean, like I say, there are all these things that you associate with an older time, even when you're born in the 1970s. Okay, well hold on. And



I failed to introduce him. I wasn't sure if he was going to speak, but we have a guest in the interview. Jeff [Rechenbach] [00:56:00]. Do you want to introduce yourself? Do you want to ask any questions?

JR: I'm Jeff Rechenbach, and I wasn't sure if I should ask a question before. I wasn't sure what my role here would be. Not off hand. Just quickly to maybe put something on the timeline, when you were first elected vice president of the local, what job did you have?

LH: I was a service rep.

JR: Okay. So they probably put TSPS I think in [00:56:30] the mid to late seventies is when those boards were pulled out of there.

LH: That's probably right. Yeah, totally right.

JR: And just my two cents, Juanita Brandon??, was she the president before you? Okay. Yes? I'm amazed that I came up with that.

LH: I didn't want to say her name. Yes. Okay. Yeah, she would be the one.

JM: Okay. Right. So sometimes when there's changes in administration, it's because there are people who [00:57:00] you think you might be able to do a better job.

LH: Yes. Yes. I felt that I could.

JM: Okay. So you become president again in this critical moment of change. Well, first off, let me just make sure. So how long were you president of the local?

LH: Probably 16 years maybe. I came on staff [00:57:30] in [19]96. So [19]84 to [19]96.

JM: Okay. So those are really pivotal years. So if you could, maybe let's just sort of take a really high level for a second. What were the major issues that you confronted as a local president during these years? Right after divestiture, when things are, so, there's so much upheaval [00:58:00] across the industry and the union.

LH: I think trying to maintain membership was a big one. Of course, we had several contracts during that time. Matter of fact, I think Jeff chaired the [19]86 contract that was on here in Ohio, and [00:58:30] I can't remember if we were going through downsizing then. A little bit, membership loss. That's about what I can remember right now.

JM: Well, so that's, it's been one of the questions that's been bouncing around in my head is that obviously there's this, and you mentioned it before, the Long Lines

folks were [00:59:00] hit so quickly and drastically by the changes associated with divestiture and the rise of competition. But I've been really curious about just how dramatic and fast those changes were for the folks who were doing this more local servicing work. Because obviously we're now several decades down the line where people have cell phones, and [00:59:30] so much of that kind of work that you were doing itself no longer exists. But it seems like in those first, in the late eighties or in the early nineties, that again, this is a hypothesis that I want you to either just to speak to, and maybe I'm just wrong, that those changes didn't happen as quickly and dramatically at the level that you'd been working at. But I'm just curious, what did you see? What did change a lot? What didn't?

LH: [01:00:00] Well, I think for us, the loss of operator services was significant. I mean, because for those of us that grew up in operator services, we just saw those jobs going away and we'd had some demonstrations over that. And [01:00:30] it didn't really seem like there was going to be, because of technology and all that, there was just no way to stop it. I mean, we couldn't single handedly stop it. But I think across the country, that's what we saw at the time was especially the demise of operator services, which is exactly what happened. And then you started seeing, even in coin, the coin department going down because you saw less coin [01:01:00] phones on the street and all of that. So I think, as I recall, for me, that's what you're seeing. You were seeing more of our jobs going away because of technology coming in. It seemed like our own technology was doing away with our jobs, quite honestly. I think you had one, Jeff, had one of the last payphone jobs, didn't you?

JR: They went on for a while [01:01:30] after I left. But yeah, I mean that industry obviously has just gone completely away. But I think most of the changes you're talking about now, were technology driven. I mean, it was the intervention of technology that eliminated the need for a long-distance operator. You could direct dial. You might remember at the time we had some campaigns, "We are People, Not Machines."

LH: Robots.

JR: Those kinds of things, trying to push back on the technology. [01:02:00] And I don't know how it felt in Columbus, but it felt overall, it was just this inexorable push that was overwhelming a lot of the jobs that we represented historically.

LH: Yeah, I remember one of the campaigns was the Darth Vader campaign trying to keep operators and blah blah. And that's true. And I mean, the other unit that we had in the local was from [01:02:30] was Yellow Pages, and it was pretty large at the time. And we started seeing the erosion of that. If you think about it, I mean, I'm probably the last one in America that goes to a hotel to see if there's a Yellow Page book. And there's not. But you started seeing some of that because of the technology. People use your phone, you Google [01:03:00] everything, so you

don't use the Yellow Pages anymore, and it's all digital. So yeah, we started seeing a lot of that.

JM: Right. As Jeff and I were talking about, imagine if you didn't go to Google now, you went to the Yellowpages.com in order to get that information.

LH: Right. Exactly. Exactly.

JR: And they had the biggest database in the world and they gave it away. Yeah. So let me ask you though, particularly in your local, 4310, [01:03:30] you were just ravaged by the elimination of these operator services jobs. So what was the role of the local then in trying to accommodate these members and get them placed or early retirements or those kinds of things? Talk a little bit about that experience, if you recall.

LH: Okay. Yeah. Well, it really was quite devastating, the experience itself, because you had the operators that were there [01:04:00] really sort of just wanted to be there in operator services because we always had the ability to transfer. And a lot of folks didn't—this is what they knew and this is what they wanted to do. So in order to transfer a lot of the jobs, you still had to test. Somewhere. And some people had been out of school for a while and were afraid to test. And so our job was trying to hook them up with someone that could sort of [01:04:30] help them through test, through one-on-one teaching a little bit and talking with them. I can remember, I was a vice president at the time, and myself and a couple other officers, we'd go in and hold some meetings with them in the break room to say, look, this office is not going to be here.

What is it maybe that you want to do? And trying to guide them into [01:05:00] other jobs if we saw where the openings were to get there. And some people just said, "No, I don't want to do anything else." But others, we were able to get them into other jobs, but our local was devastated. That was probably one of the larger units, was the operator services. And then Yellow Pages, of course. But it was really heartbreaking to go through that and to see the offices. [01:05:30] And I know up here in Cleveland, the local that had the most operators, 4340, I remember, I can't remember the date, but I do remember the local president at the time, which I'll never forget because he was a male that had operator services, but he was one of the men who really understood operator services [01:06:00] and cared for the primarily women work group.

And he was there the last day, the very last call that came into that office, it was Eddie Phillips. He was there in his office, the last call that came in to operator services. And I will never forget that. I get choked up even thinking about it. He did, and he was always very supportive. But yeah, so that was probably what we did was just tried to talk [01:06:30] to them. And it was surprising some of the folks that just, they didn't want to do anything else. And it was hard to understand a little bit because for us, we saw the writing on the wall and knew we had to do

something else. So you put yourself in a position to try to get someplace else, the transfer thing. But some people just didn't want to, and they actually left.

JR: [01:07:00] And it was a combination of things. I mean, they liked the job. The hours, there was sort of unique scheduling in operator services. It was 24 hour operations. And so some people liked overnights and they couldn't find that anywhere else in the company. And it was just too dramatic a change, just too much to make that shift. And part of the frustration, I know as a local officer, was that at some level, the union was getting blamed [01:07:30] for this as well. And the locals that handled it better were like yours: the ones that actually went and sat and counseled and talked with people and tried to show them a different path. And at least if you tried to show another path, you ameliorated the angst on the part of the ones that didn't want to take it, that at least knew you were trying to help.

LH: I hope so. Yeah, that was pretty devastating to go through and to see that happen. But [01:08:00] it's technology for you. What's you going to do?

JM: Well. We talked a little bit about some of these strategies that you had used to build power in the days before—well, even with the example of the skort story, even after divestiture, right? Not all of those tools go away from you. So I'm curious, we talked about the negative impacts, [01:08:30] but did you start to find also, again, new tools that you could use to build power in the workplace? Or was it mostly just triage that you were doing here in these late eighties, early nineties?

LH: I think the power came from just being, making sure that you were inclusive and as new people came in, making sure that they—one, you ask them to be a member and ask [01:09:00] them to get on a committee, ask them to be involved, and trying to make sure that your steward structure was strong and that they—because they're your eyes and ears on the floor for you or in the group, and making sure that that was happening and trying to keep people drawn in to have something to do. I think that's where I saw the power was making sure—because you had younger folks even coming in, obviously younger [01:09:30] than myself and just pulling them in and keeping people together. And I think as long as people feel that they are *part of*, they will continue to help you build power. And again, that's, even today, I try to do that still today. It's become a little harder I think in the workplace today. And I don't know why that [01:10:00] is. I think maybe folks' expectation of what “the” union, I always say *our* union, but they say the union is supposed to do. And so it is harder to do, but I think it's something that I need to continue to strive to do is to bring new people in.

JR: So as local president, your local had operator services, it had the service rep job, I think it [01:10:30] had data as well. So you had a data center down there.

LH: Yep.

JR: So what was your overall experience with, I don't know how to quite phrase this, but the level of unionization within each of those groups. I mean I have my opinion about which groups I think were stronger union members I guess, than others, but what was your experience with that?

LH: My experience would've been with operator service was certainly the strongest. I mean, you could [01:11:00] walk in and say we got an issue and we're out. We would get up and go out. You wouldn't have to go through a dissertation of 25 questions. "We're out. We'll talk about it when we're on the street." Data was a little different. That group was, I don't know how to put this, they were more reluctant, if you will, to be—I mean, they needed a lot of explanation. [01:11:30] "Am I going to be paid? Am I losing any money," blah blah. They needed all of that. But you had the service rep group that actually got mixed sometimes, but they got to the point where you could pull them out pretty easy. If something happened to someone and you felt that it warranted hitting the street, you could get them there. Now you might have to talk to them a little [01:12:00] more when you're outside, but you could get them there.

But the data center—I'm glad you mentioned that. I had forgotten that the data center was a little tricky. The stewards that we got in there, it took a little longer as I recall, for us to build that steward structure up in the data center. But once we got there, we were there, but they were still a little more timid [01:12:30] in wanting to take collective action, I should say. And I think some of that was because some of the folks that were in the data center probably strive to be managers. So that's what it was. That's where the former president came from as well. So you had some political things going on there too. But yeah, and the data center actually was when I started, was one [01:13:00] of the departments that was not that diverse when I first started there. Yeah, they were not, because I can remember one of the young ladies that went into the data center, it was quite the talk. I'm like, "What's going on here?" And she was an African American woman, darker skinned than myself. And that was the talk. [01:13:30] I was like, okay, but you really didn't hear that in the other departments, but in the data center you did. I'm glad you brought that up. Forgot about that.

JM: And just as a follow up to that, it sounds like possibly what's happening was that the pockets of union strength were also in these places that were shrinking fastest? And so did that mean that you, to keep a strong union, you had to really [01:14:00] pivot to these places that had not traditionally been strong in order to try to recreate the strength within the local?

LH: Yeah, I think it made us have to look at some of the other departments a little closer and stay with them. Yellow Pages was always a little difficult because those folks thought they were a cut above, quite honestly. Well, I shouldn't say that, but they did. [01:14:30] I mean, they made pretty good money based on the sale of the Yellow Pages. So they weren't as traditional union folks as what I'm used to. But they were our members no less. And we represented them, like we

did everybody else and picketed in front of their locations and all of that when their contracts, time for contracts, and everything. And sometimes [01:15:00] it was mostly us out there and everything. We had a location, it was the north part of Columbus, remember that location? Yeah, so I mean it was interesting. And we actually had a couple stewards out of that group and the couple we had were pretty good. But yeah.

JM: Well just one more question along these lines that sort of picks [01:15:30] up some of these different threads. So as these new, I'm just trying to wrap my brain around it, just how dynamic it must have been in the sense that you've got these sort of radical shifts in just what kind of work is being done and as new people are coming in, what kind of jobs—where was all the work shifting to during these years? Were there these whole new divisions that were springing up [01:16:00] out of whole cloth because of the new technology and that's where the new jobs were that younger people would come into? Or is it essentially the same kind of categories but just overall shrinking still during these years?

LH: Some of them were the same sort of categories. when you think about the service reps, they sort of had different segments of service reps. They had the business side, the residence side, and then there was a group, [01:16:30] I'm trying to think of the name of this group. They were not service reps, they were technical associates, I believe—that's where Diane was in. And some of those groups to me, they were little spinoffs of the service reps. So they weren't paid at that level, but it was sort of a lower level that they were being paid. They weren't doing the full job, but they'd spin that off and they eventually went away too. [01:17:00] So I mean, my local, quite honestly over the years went down to hardly nothing and has since merged with another local. So we finally got small enough that—it just pained me to have to do it—but you did for the betterment of the members that were still there. You just couldn't maintain that. So we finally merged.

JM: [01:17:30] What did that other local that you merged with, what were they doing that was strong enough?

LH: Well, it wasn't the local in Columbus. We actually merged with the local here and Youngstown, 4300, who has AT&T and was a very good local, leadership there was very good. And we just merged [01:18:00] maybe four or five years ago, about five years ago.

JM: So this is the new AT&T, essentially post all of these transformations?

LH: Oh yeah. Yeah. This is just about five years ago. So we merged with them and I mean we used to have almost a thousand in Yellow Pages and I think we're down to 10 or 12 people now in Yellow Pages. So I mean they took everything and [01:18:30] the consumer service rep group got to be very low and a lot of those folks that were left transferred to the Dayton location. And quite honestly, a lot of them have left even there because the jobs just aren't there. And some of the jobs

for the service rep—we've got office closings now—that work is actually going [01:19:00] part into Texas and some into Atlanta.

JM: Okay. Well here I feel like I need to ask at this point. Do you want to take a break?

LH: I could, yes.

[BREAK]

JM: Okay, we're back. So Linda, so back to another “saying yes” question or at least another story question, which is you're going to go on staff from this [01:19:30] president role that you've had for several years here. So tell me the story of that. How did you make that transition from being a local elected leader to going onto staff—how and why?

LH: Jeff Rechenbach asked me to come on staff and I came up here and interviewed with Jeff and I obviously said “Yes, I would come on staff,” and [01:20:00] I had obviously seen what staff reps do. And after thinking about it, I actually said yes. And I think it was an opportunity to just, in my opinion, to help continue to try to do more for the movement. So that was in [19]96 and I had been on [19]95 bargaining, and that was interesting for [01:20:30] me. I enjoyed that experience. As much as you can enjoy bargaining.

JM: Do you mind if we, I apologize you mentioned that in the paperwork, but I had forgotten about it. Do you mind if we dial back and tell that story first? I think it might be important to have.

LH: Oh, well, I mean [19]95 bargaining sort of brought together a number of contracts, consolidated a number of contracts, and as I recall, [01:21:00] it was a little lengthy. It seems like we went over. And so that was a good experience to go through that with the bargaining team. And obviously Jeff was here and just under his leadership being able to pull that together was critical. And I said it in the [oral history interviewee data sheet] papers that Jeff was one of my mentors because [01:21:30] obviously being in a leadership role, you get to see folks and how they work and what they do. And Jeff always to me had the ability, and I said it on the paper there, staying calm when situations get really bad. And I saw that and I had seen it over the years with Jeff and I tried to do that and I still [01:22:00] try to do that today. I'm not as successful as Jeff with that sometimes, but I do try. It was one of the things that Jeff had taught me, but watching him lead us through what I thought was an important contract, all contracts are important, but this one was the consolidation, and it really quite honestly for me was a thing of beauty to watch, to see someone lead us through [01:22:30] that type of thing.

- JM: Do you mind if I dig into it just a little bit? Just tell me, describe to me what was being consolidated and then can you tell me about some of the issues that were so tricky that needed to be so carefully handled?
- LH: Well, it was just a consolidation of a number of state contracts, and obviously we want the best of the best out of each of those contracts. As a member [01:23:00] of the bargaining team, from Ohio, at the time we had the right to strike. And so trying to even work through that with our colleagues who didn't have that was one of the issues. But I think overall, I can't remember all of the issues going on in [19]95, but I do remember that each of us from each state would have an issue that we were passionate about and we wanted to [01:23:30] keep something in our Ohio contract, the Michigan person wanted to keep—and so I think that in itself was tricky enough for our leadership just to get us all on the same page, quite honestly. And so that was a good bargaining experience, I think, just to sit through that and work through with our colleagues on that.
- JR: And [01:24:00] so what were the contracts?
- LH: It was the Ohio, Michigan, Illinois, Indiana, Wisconsin contracts.
- JR: And each one was a separate and unique contract?
- LH: Right, each one was separate and unique. And like I said, everybody had something in their contract that they felt very strong about maintaining. It was the best of the best. And of course I was from Ohio, so I thought Ohio's was the best.
- JM: Well, [01:24:30] which one ended up being the pattern, or is that fair? Was one the pattern.
- LH: I would say—No, I wouldn't say we had a pattern. I'd say we actually did collectively pull that all together. And I think it had to be that way. If you had just said, we're taking the Ohio contract and you get one and you get one, something from each, I don't think that would've worked. [01:25:00] And so really, like I said, I commend the leadership for being able to pull us altogether like that. And so I learned a lot from that contract.
- JM: Okay. Well, and so as I imagine that this was again sort of a formative experience both in terms of you sort of looking over the rail and sort of seeing what it might be like to be a staff member, and then it also introduced you to a much greater degree to the current [01:25:30] staff. And so made that transition—it helped facilitate that transition for you. So to come back to it though, those early days as a staff member—so what did you start doing and what sort of new environment did you find yourself in and you start doing?
- LH: Well, my new environment was to move to Illinois.



JM: A very new environment.

LH: So I was [01:26:00] very afraid. I had really never been outside Ohio. And I remember saying to Jeff that, “[I’m] going to Illinois,” that’s where the job was. And Jeff said, “Well, you’ll end up liking it, and probably you’ll fall in love with Illinois,” which I did. I actually did. And so I get there and [01:26:30] I knew the staff that was there of course, and the secretaries, knew them, but it was a different experience because I was outside my comfort zone of Ohio. I knew the locals in Ohio, they knew me. I didn’t really know all the locals that well in Illinois. And some of them were different sectors, printing sector [01:27:00] and that. But it was really, in my opinion, good for my growth to get out of the state of Ohio, in my comfort zone. And I think I first learned that, “Okay, you can do this.” Obviously, Jeff saw something in me—I always say—that I didn’t, [and I] say it myself, that “You can do this.” And I did. And so [01:27:30] I just think it was good growth for me to be able to get outside and meet other locals and other—what we call sectors—in the sectors, and learn about them as well. And so that has helped me in my role today—having done that.

JM: Yeah, well, because I think that being able to compare these two would be really interesting. Moving from Ohio, which is—it’s not nearly as [01:28:00] “one big city and the rest of the state,” as Illinois is. And so here you’re in suburban Chicago, Schaumburg. And so what was it like to be now here in this—not just in a different state—but a state that has its own union culture? Chicago is just kind of this very specific thing in terms of its relationship with Democratic politics, and [01:28:30] how did you start to get your feet so that you could be a really effective staff member in this terrain that you were just having to just, I imagine, just learn a new thing every day.

LH: Just by meeting the locals—going and actually sitting down with them and talking with them. And the staff that was over there at the time was very helpful in helping make that happen. And the assignment I had at the time [01:29:00] had a lot of work to do with one of the locals that was a large local in Chicago, and they could be rather intense, but there were a lot of grievances and all that they had. And so I had to work through that and through working with that local helped quite a bit. I mean, [01:29:30] they could be trying, but it was just sort of methodical to say, “Okay, this is where we’re at, this is the grievance that we have, and we’re going to go through these,” and just *meeting* on a regular basis to get through them. And that really did sort of break some ice with them and they became very supportive of me while I was over there.

And like I say, even just getting to know the locals has helped me today. Because [01:30:00] they mention it sometimes, “Oh, I remember when you first came over here.” I didn’t really know them. And so you just had to get to know them. And so I had to pick myself up and just get out there. And I think Jeff has heard this, when I first went over there driving over there, I was sitting at the toll road and I’d never been through a toll road before. And it rained, it hailed, it snowed, the sun

came out, and I was sitting there in tears, [01:30:30] “What is going on? What have I done?” But it was like I say, it took me out of my comfort zone, and I, to this day, wish that whenever we put somebody on staff that we had the ability to move them someplace else. I really do think that helped with my growth. I know it did.

JM: Yeah. Hard as it was. It was—

LH: Yeah, I was really scared. I was really scared. Like [01:31:00] I said, I hadn't been any place. And then just getting to know a new place and I was there by myself, other than the staff [who] was there. But being there by myself and that's not a ride you want to make to Ohio every weekend, back and forth. I did quite a bit. So just learning the area and all was interesting. And so that's how I became a Starbucks junkie. Being [01:31:30] in Chicago. Literally, there was a Starbucks not too far from the house. And so I'd go there and you'd sort of see on the weekend the same people, and then they had little combos and stuff, and so we just sort of started hanging out. So that's how you sort of get to know people. And so hence I became a Starbucks junkie.

JM: Alright. So were [01:32:00] you mostly servicing this one local in the Chicago area, or did you have a field that took you out into the downstate?

LH: Most of the bulk of mine of my assignment was the one local, but because I was over there, I did have other locals assigned to me, and that's how I got to know them.

JM: And so what was this local?

LH: [Local] 4250 [01:32:30] was the largest local. They mostly had AT&T, what we called “Legacy T.” And some of the work you did there—a lot of the work you did with them—was handling their third step grievances. And so they were really backed up and that's how I got to know them. The other locals I met sort of through politics and stuff like that.

JM: Were they really backed up because they just had really bad—I mean, was this [01:33:00] a bad working environment kind of situation, where they were filing grievances in a response to bad conditions, or what was going on? To the extent that you can talk about it, what was going on?

LH: I'd really rather not say.

JM: Okay. Let's just scaffold for a second. So [01:33:30] you go on staff in, what is it, nineteen-ninety—?

LH: Six.

- JML: Ninety-six. And how long did you stay in that role, out in Chicago?
- LH: I was in Chicago a couple years and then I transferred back here, on staff.
- JM: Okay. This is a pattern—
- LH: Sorry about a year and a half. I think I might've actually been there a year and a half. I don't think I was there two years.
- JR: I thought it was—like two years.
- LH: Might've been two years. Might've been two years, yeah.
- JM: Okay. So [01:34:00] when you come back, what do you come back doing?
- LH: What was my assignment then? Well, on staff, you're assigned the locals. If you give me the locals—I'm trying to think of what—I think I had Yellow Pages. Yes, I know I had Yellow Pages. I never [01:34:30] got rid of Yellow Pages. Ever. Had them. I might've had—did I have the rep? Did I have consumer? I still might've had consumer in my thing. I'd have to look at—I can't remember what all I had as a staff.
- JM: Well, this is the first time I've heard this word. What is consumer?
- LH: Oh, that's the service reps. Yeah, I'm sorry.
- JR: [01:35:00] So one of the things that we had done here when I became vice president [is] we shifted. We used to just assign staff based on locals. “You've got these locals, [and] you've got these locals.” And instead I tried to bundle it so that somebody would deal with service reps across the state because you'd develop an expertise with those issues rather than just a local. And I think you had service reps, I think—I know you had Yellow Pages obviously—but it seemed like there was something else [01:35:30] as well. And I can't remember now how else we broke that down. But that was the notion: that you worked with a *bunch* of different locals and you'd overlap with other people working with those locals as well.
- LH: And we still use that model here today, and it makes a big difference because—I think what you were saying was—the company could sort of whipsaw staff reps, and, this way, if that [01:36:00] was your unit, you were the point of contact, and so it came through you, and that was for all five states. And that really has been a better model, I think, than what we used to have.
- JM: Just to clarify, so you would have a Yellow Pages in all five states?
- LH: Uh-huh.

JM: Wow. Okay.

LH: So, if there was an issue, like I say, it would come to you; you'd be [01:36:30] the point of contact, so you knew what the issue was. And the way it used to be set up, I would have maybe Yellow Pages in Ohio and somebody would have Yellow Pages over in Michigan, and the company would say this to them and this to somebody else. Yeah. And we still use that today, what you set up.

JR: Yeah, I mean the staff size was shrinking and it just seemed to be a better way to [01:37:00] deal with things. You still had geographic assignments, so you had some locals because of political, local politics, that kind of a thing. But with so much communication going on outside of in-person meetings, it just seemed to make more sense. And I think we're still the only district that does that.

LH: Yeah, we are.

JR: Everybody else still is assigned by local numbers. And that's it.

JM: That was going to be my next question.

LH: Yeah. [01:37:30] And we are—we're unique. District four is unique.

JM: As I'm learning.

LH: In a good way.

JM: So again, let me just scaffold for a second, which is my word for just getting parts of the story so that I know how to dig deeper. Obviously, you've moved on from that position now. And so how long did you [01:38:00] stay as a staff rep?

LH: I would have to look. I don't know.

JM: I keep asking you these questions. That should be on my paper here [reference to background documents provided by interviewee].

LH: I went to admin.

JR: Yeah, when was that? Was that when Seth Rosen [01:38:30] became vice president?

LH: Uh-huh

JR: Yeah, so that would've been 2005?

JM: I think it says 2007 here. Do you mind if I just read this from your CV here?

LH: Oh.

JM: Maybe this will be faster. So Linda Hinton was sworn in as vice president of CWA District Four on July 25, 2012, unanimously elected on April 22, 2013, reelected June 8, 2015. Again, June 29, 2019. [01:39:00] And again July 2023. Before that, Linda had served as a CWA staff rep from 1995 until being promoted to administrative director to the vice president in 2007. And then 2009 you became assistant to the vice president. So can we talk about those years? So again, you're moving from—or is this true—moving from this kind of servicing role into [01:39:30] this administrative role? And I'm really curious about what that was like and what you learned from taking on that kind of work.

LH: Well, it was different, for sure. So from that role, I think the biggest thing I learned was to probably think a little more strategically about when you had projects to do and all of that. That's [01:40:00] one of the things that I would say that I did learn a lot from Seth Rosen—who had promoted me to AD—was just trying to think a little more strategic about what the task is and how to get from A to Z, and always to be open to—which he was—was always open, as was Jeff, to help you. I mean, if [01:40:30] you needed help, you always felt, and you always knew that you could go to either one of them and say, “I need some help in getting here.” And I never felt like I couldn't say that and wasn't afraid to say it if there was something I didn't know how to do or had questions on.

And the other thing is in the administration roles, obviously you have staff reporting [01:41:00] to you and you're sort of helping to oversee that. And so that in itself can be—interesting—in my words. And so you just learn how to, I think to manage that. And it goes back to, for me, *listening*, you have to listen and people need to know that they are valued and what they're doing, their work matters. [01:41:30] And that's the core for me. And sometimes I have to step back and say, you make a decision based on the facts that you have in front of you, and they're not always going to be right. You should be able to explain why you made the decision and be able to step back and go, maybe I need to look at it a different way. You've got a number of people saying, “Why'd you do [01:42:00] this? Why'd you do that?” And step back and look and say, “Why *did* I do that? Maybe I do need to look at it another way.”

And that's something again, going back, I hate to keep doing this, but going back to my grandmother and my mother who always said, “You're not always going to be right. So step back, look in the mirror and think about [01:42:30] what you said, how you said it, why you made the decision.” And I do that quite often, even now. I do that quite often even now. But it was a transition going into administration, I think, because you are sort of supervising your colleagues, your peers, and so it's a different role at times for me. Sometimes I like [01:43:00] it and sometimes I don't.

JM: Yeah, yeah. Well, just one question along these lines, and I'll just move the story forward a little bit, but I just think I'm struck by the fact that here you've had this local experience where you deeply got to know Columbus and the world of Columbus and your coworkers there. And then you go off into this five state world where then you start to see the view from a thousand feet and then you zoom [01:43:30] back in to an administrative role, which you're still trying to look at the world from a thousand feet, but you're not out in the field anymore. And so I'm just curious, what did that mean for the kind of administrator or even the kind of vice president that you would become in terms of the way that you put together each one of those experiences?

LH: I think I realize that just like in the local, you need [01:44:00] to rely on your staff to be your eyes and ears. You have to rely on your staff to give you honest information out in the field. And whether you want to hear it or not, you need to hear it. And some things you get, you really don't want to hear. Sometimes it's personal, and you just have to learn to sort of take it on the chin and [01:44:30] separate what's real and what's not. And for me, I do that. I mean, I just can't take everything that I hear about myself personal—while I might get angry at, or piss you off, really. You just got to know how to separate that. And sometimes I do that better than others. And sometimes just [01:45:00] for me, I can have to shut down for a minute and think about what I'm going to say and not react because I've been there, done that, and that gets you nowhere.

So I think just keeping in mind that you got to listen and know that—trust the people that's out there and surround yourself with people that's going to be honest with you. Because I've never wanted to be [01:45:30] around or be in a position where I'm leading a group and folks don't feel that they can be honest with you about their real feelings. And that's the one thing that I think here in the district, no matter who the VP has been, I think all the staff have always felt that they could come to the leadership and say, “Hey, we don't like this and this is why.” And you have to be able to talk through a situation. And I think [01:46:00] we take pride in that because all the VPs have been that way. And I don't think I'm any different. People come to me all the time, and I think that's what makes it work here. It makes it work for me as a person and as a leader.

JM: Well, so just one more of these yes questions. And then I'm going to ask just one more sort of big picture question and then try to sort of land us. [01:46:30] So why pursue this vice presidency role? What was the thing that you said, I'm ready to step into this executive position?

LH: Well, I actually was not, but unfortunately because Seth['s] death, I was appointed, and [01:47:00] that was nothing that I was going after. And so I found myself in that position. And I do think, when I think about it, after that happened, I probably was in the best position to take over just because of my roles and having had worked under Seth and with him, and like [01:47:30] I say, he really taught me to think very strategic. He was just one of those strategic thinkers and

I'm liable to get from A to Z by going around John Henry's barn. And he'd say, "Well, can't you get there quicker," by this, this, and that? And so I learned to do that. So I was in a position to do it, and it just happened. And so once I just felt that taking that position, [01:48:00] I wanted to do the best I could do because that's what we do in District Four. And so I chose to run again because I enjoy doing the work. This has been my life's work basically. And I still enjoy doing it. I love it every day. I love trying to solve problems with the staff and work with the coworkers that I [01:48:30] have on the board. And so that's why I'm here.

JM: Well, so I mean that's what I want to just touch on next, which is you've been in this job for a decade and so over a decade now.

JR: Senior vice president on the executive board, aren't you?

LH: I am. Can you believe it?

JR: The longest serving officer on that board.

LH: Can you believe it?

JM: So I would imagine here in a decade [01:49:00] you've discovered the things that you want to work on, the things that you want to put your stamp on, the things that you feel like, again, when you would leave this job that you could point to and say, this is my legacy. What are those things that you've identified as either by out of necessity or out of choice that you've really focused on?

LH: Well, I think one of the things in our district that had been lacking was organizing new members. [01:49:30] And so that's a big focus. And we have done fairly well. Can we do better? Absolutely. And so we are working on that. And then also just working on getting some of [the] new members, the younger members involved. So we organize folks and then even traditional locals that we have, [01:50:00] trying to get them to understand that you got to continually get members involved. You got to keep get members involved. Now, COVID I think took a real hit on all of us. I hated—I hated—work from home. I understood the necessity for it, but I do think we lost touch quite a bit with our membership. And so trying to get that back would [01:50:30] be huge for me. So I think the organizing, getting new members involved. And right now, to be honest, it is even the local leaders that are out there to get them to work all three sides of our triangle, that's huge. And internal organizing as well. So those are some things that we are working on and focusing on right now. [01:51:00] And then I do think that something I've seen in our district that I would like to see us do better is have women and minorities more involved because we just do not at any point. And I experienced a little bit of that back in the local, where folks said, "Well, you're there."

What does that mean? [01:51:30] I am not the only—the one and only—and don't represent all African-Americans in the city of Columbus. No, that doesn't work

for me. And I've seen that now here too. It's like, "Well, you're there." Okay, well that doesn't mean that there's not room for other people. And so that's something I really would like to work on it. We're trying to work on that through [01:52:00] our human rights committees, trying to get the locals to have *active* human rights committees because we often—you'll call them, "We got a human rights committee." "Oh, who's on it?" One person. Okay, what are they doing? Who else have you asked to come on? New members? We have a Next Generation committee that's from the national. And so it's even hard getting younger folks to—locals to allow [01:52:30] younger folks to participate. And so I think those are some things that we're working on. Well, that is things we're working on here. And it's a challenge, but you just got to keep at it. Some days you get sort of down thinking about it. "Have you moved the dial any?" Not really. Not enough. So I'll continue to work on that for the time that I'm here.

JM: Well, this is the first time it's come up in any of the [01:53:00] interviews that I've done. Can you explain to anyone who's listening to this what the CWA triangle is?

LH: Oh, yes. CWA triangle. We have three sides to the triangle. And so we have our organizing, our CWA strong, on one side of the triangle, and our community service.

JM: So you have these principles.

LH: Our principles, all three sides work together. Not one side is going to work alone. [01:53:30] And that's really the crux of CWA, quite honestly, if locals think about it and really put their mind to doing the work, I mean all the way up the ladder, not just locals, but we have to keep that in mind too. Representation. A lot of locals will look at representation and think it's just all about the contracts and grievances, but the other two sides of the triangle to all work together.

JM: Well, [01:54:00] I just want to ask one more question. I just want to try to illustrate this a little bit. Is there one, whether it's an organizing campaign or contract campaign, or is there any in this 10 years, any particular story? Any particular example that really stands out in your mind of something that you were, like I said, sort of proud of or learned from, that was a kind of big initiative that you were part of?

LH: [01:54:30] I'm big into politics. I think politics matters. And sometimes getting that across to our members is a little difficult of just what it means to us. And I *firmly* believe that we have to have the right people in office to help us when we're going through contracts or the organizing, representation even, everything we do. So I'm probably most proud of, [01:55:00] I did not initiate it, but most proud of the work we did here in Ohio and SB [Senate Bill] 5. I think that was huge.



JM: Which was what?

LH: It was [public-sector] collective bargaining here in Ohio. And I think the work we've done with some of—in each of our states, we probably have an example of good politicians. [US senator] Sherrod Brown here in Ohio is just by far *the most* important person as far as I'm concerned in the Senate. [01:55:30] And we'll be working on that as well. But getting locals involved in our IHX [AT&T wireless In-Home workers] organizing with Mobility workers was huge here. And we did have a lot of help from some of the locals that stepped up for that. But we've got a lot of political stuff going on in Michigan, of course, getting that was huge. And we had good [01:56:00] follow-up with that. The locals really came together and got how important this was. And they were actually recognized at convention. We had plaque that we gave to with Gretchen's signature to headquarters. So I mean, those were things that we here in the district worked on that were super important.

JM: That's Gretchen. [01:56:30] Her last name is—

LH: Whitmer.

JM: Whitmer. The governor of Michigan.

LH: Michigan. Yeah, so I mean, I mention politics because that's a very hard thing to get locals really engaged in, I think. And to know that you can't be afraid to talk to your membership and give them the facts. I think when they have the facts, they'll vote the right way for people who care about *working* people's issues. [01:57:00] But I think it's part of my job to help guide our staff and to help guide the locals to get them to understand the importance of it. And what it means to us. Because oftentimes when we're in bargaining, they'll go, “Can you call Sherrod?,” can you do this or that? “Well, let's see, what have you done to help with this?” I mean, so sometimes when you put it in that perspective, [01:57:30] they just look at you like, “Oh, I can't believe she said that.” Well, yeah, I did.

But yeah, I mean, I really just think that it seemed like we work on a lot of things. For me, if we can get locals engaged in all three sides of our triangle and get the members, get them to ask the members to participate and get information to the members, [01:58:00] I would feel very good about something that I did here. And then the other piece would be getting women and minorities more involved because we have a program called Minority Leadership Institute at CWA. And it quite honestly is getting a little hard to submit names for that. And that's a shame. I mean, it's coming up this year as [01:58:30] well. And when I look around, it's like, “Well, who's doing the work? Who's going to come up?” And I believe in giving people opportunity. I say it all the time, there's a place in our union for everybody. There's something somebody can do and everything has value and it's important. Well, that's me in a nutshell.

JM: Okay. Alright. I think, Jeff, do you have anything you want to add?

JR: No.

JM: Okay. [01:59:00] Well I think that that's a pretty good note to end on. Is there anything else that you'd like to say?

LH: No, no, thank you. It's very interesting.

JM: Alright, I'm going to go ahead and turn this off with your permission.

LH: Okay.

[Break]

JM: So this is just a quick addendum. So Linda, you were saying that you were part of a worker-to-worker sharing program that took you to Mexico, right?

LH: Yes, I was. And I was saying that it was [01:59:30] just interesting because they were working on an organizing drive there. And so I had the opportunity to go and meet with some of the workers. And it was just one of those eye openers for me because their working conditions were so vastly different than what we have here in the States. And so to see that, that they work under conditions where [02:00:00] people actually carry guns and they have to be very careful about what they say, what they do, where they go. And one of the places that we went actually had guards there with AK7s. And so that was, while it's unnerving, these are the conditions that some of the workers work under. And being a service rep myself and some of them [02:00:30] were service reps, we were able to talk about those working conditions.

And I mean, if they're not able to go home, they quite honestly have to sleep there. And they would sleep on the floor, sometimes there were cots. And for them to get to work for me, you hop in the car, you go to work, you get on the bus, you go to work. Well, they go on a bus and it took them three or four hours to get there. And same [02:01:00] going back home. And just even as we think about working here, you're going down to a cafeteria to get your lunch. Well, not there. They would have to go outside across the street and to a truck and that. So it was really an eye-opener to see the working conditions there. But what was hopeful was that they were very strong-willed and [02:01:30] they just aren't going to give up until they're recognized as a full-fledged union.

JM: And I'm not asking so much for you to comment, but I mean this so much reflects, doesn't it some of this turn to international organizing that so many unions have started to do as shops flee not just to other regions, like the South, but to Mexico, to other parts of the world. Unions have had to turn to follow [02:02:00] that work and organize with those workers.

Linda Hinton Interview – August 16, 2023

LH: Oh, absolutely. Because some of our work is *going* overseas and that, so I do think we have an obligation to try to raise the living standards for those workers and the pay as well. They hardly make anything. So, yeah, absolutely.

JM: Okay. Thank you very much for that.

LH: You're welcome.