

Communications Workers of America Oral History Project

Interviewee: Rusher, Sandy

Interviewer: Debbie Goldman

Date of Interview: February 22 and 26, 2024

Place of Interview: Charleston, South Carolina (via zoom)

Page Total: 41

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

Sandy Rusher – February 22 and 26, 2024

**Debbie** [00:00:00] It is February 22<sup>nd</sup> 2024. This is Debbie Goldman, who is the interviewer. Hannah Goldman is also recording with us. And this is an interview of Sandy Rusher over Zoom. Sandy Rusher is in -- what's the name of your town?

**Sandy** [00:00:19] Charleston, South Carolina.

**Debbie** [00:00:20] Charleston, South Carolina. Hannah and Debbie are in New York City. Sandy, Thank you for sending me your timeline and the major campaigns. I think we have a lot to talk about. Let's start first with a little personal information. When were you born? Where? Tell us a little bit about your family and the community where you grew up.

**Sandy** [00:01:07] I was born in 1955 in a little town called Miami, Oklahoma where the Miami Indians are from.

**Debbie** [00:01:15] Can you spell Miami?

**Sandy** [00:01:18] It's spelled like people call Miami, Florida. But it's "Mah-ya-muh." M-I-A-M-I. In the northeastern part of Oklahoma by the Kansas-Missouri border. I lived there until I was in second grade and I moved to the big city of Tulsa, Oklahoma where I grew up until I moved away to go to college.

**Debbie** [00:01:49] What do you recall about your childhood that may have shaped your values?

**Sandy** [00:01:57] Wow. Miami was a really small town. My grandparents lived across the park. My grandfather owned the Rexall drugstore in town, so we thought we were big deals there because we could just walk into the drugstore and get candy and give it to our friends, and we didn't even know there was money because we had the charge account. I spent a lot of time with my grandparents. During that time, my dad was a football coach. My mom stayed at home and it was pretty idyllic. Then we moved to Tulsa and it was the big city. I remember walking into the elementary school that was bigger than most buildings in Miami and couldn't believe that it was such a large place. So that was an adjustment. But Tulsa was a lovely place to grow up. I stayed there. I went to college at Tulsa University and really didn't leave until I left to go to graduate school.

**Debbie** [00:03:16] Is there any story from your youth that you would like to share that captures your memories of your youth?

**Sandy** [00:03:30] Oh, God, Debbie -- I thought I was going to talk about my CWA career. I'd have to think about that. I'm sure there are a ton, but it's not right on the tip of my brain.

**Debbie** [00:03:42] Okay. Was your family religious?

**Sandy** [00:03:47] We went to a Methodist church. We went every Sunday. We finally quit going. It was a big, beautiful Art Deco church in downtown Tulsa. My dad always thought it was a little pretentious, and we always fought going, but I was in the choir there, and I went through the stuff to accept the church when I was in sixth or seventh grade. But I would not call us a particularly religious family.

Sandy Rusher – February 22 and 26, 2024

**Debbie** [00:04:33] Okay. [*Hannah closes the window.*] What did you know about unions when you were growing up in Tulsa?

**Sandy** [00:04:43] Well, in Miami, the rubber workers union -- there was a BF Goodrich tire manufacturing thing, and they were very strong in the community. I do remember my parents said you wouldn't register as anything besides a Democrat in that part of Oklahoma because the only primaries that meant anything were the Democratic primaries. And you had to register by party, and couldn't vote in the other party's primaries. Miami was kind of a yellow dog Democratic area at the time, and even Tulsa was much more progressive than Oklahoma City and west Oklahoma. So what you think of now as an incredibly red state, Oklahoma -- it was not like that at the time. Most of the people elected were Democrats growing up.

**Debbie** [00:05:45] And you were aware of that?

**Sandy** [00:05:49] I was aware of that. And then I was aware [that] when we moved to Tulsa, my mom became active in the Republican Party. She was a precinct chair. I'd go out and help her, walk the precincts and do some political work. But she was quite embarrassed when my sister and I registered as Democrats. It was really upsetting to her.

**Debbie** [00:06:15] Why?

**Sandy** [00:06:17] Because she was known in the Republican area and she couldn't even convince her own daughters to register Republican. But the Republican Party was also a different party than it is in Oklahoma now. So not to be too judgmental -- my parents were the fiscally responsible Republicans who were, particularly my mother, more socially conscious. But when we were growing up there, we didn't know -- we never heard about -- there's a lot about the Tulsa Riots now in 1921 and a lot of those kind of political things that were going on. Unlike Miami, where there are a lot of Native Americans and you all lived together, next door to each other. Tulsa, with its African-American population, was very segregated. There was north Tulsa and south Tulsa. Right where the riots occurred was the border, the Greenwood area, downtown, and everything else was south of Tulsa. So it was quite a segregated place. My dad came from the west side of Tulsa, which was the lower-income working class white area. My grandfather was a letter carrier and because he had the most stable job in that family that was regular, they had a series of family moving in and out of their little house in west Tulsa often. I remember my dad talked about he and his brother slept in the -- well, it was called the wash shed, out back. So he came from that and probably west Tulsa is still very much -- I still go back to Tulsa, but it's probably still very much working class, predominantly white.

**Debbie** [00:08:17] Which was the white part of Tulsa? And which one did you live in?

**Sandy** [00:08:22] I lived in south [Tulsa].

**Debbie** [00:08:24] So your high school was pretty much all white?

**Sandy** [00:08:27] It was pretty much all white. When my sister and my husband -- they were two grades ahead of me in high school -- we had voluntary bussing. So you could volunteer. They took some of the best teachers in town to try to keep from having mandated bussing. They tried to create, what was called the black high school at the time -- junior high, high school. And there was volun-

Sandy Rusher – February 22 and 26, 2024

tary bussing. You could choose to go there, or you could go there for some classes, which was what my husband did. He actually graduated from the high school that we both went to, but he volunteered to be part of this new thing.

**Debbie** [00:09:12] What year was that? And did you volunteer?

**Sandy** [00:09:15] It was 1972. I didn't volunteer. We had lived in an area before I started high school -- so when I was in junior high, I went to a downtown junior high school that was quite integrated. And there were some issues and problems there, so I didn't volunteer to go later. I really wasn't politically aware and I barely went to school [*laughs*] during the time.

**Debbie** [00:09:51] Well, that's a whole story. What were you doing?

**Sandy** [00:09:54] Oh, I don't even want to say.

**Debbie** [00:09:58] Okay. Just quickly -- when did you register as a Democrat?

**Sandy** [00:10:02] The day I turned eighteen.

**Debbie** [00:10:05] And why did you want to be a Democrat?

**Sandy** [00:10:09] I think it was more that I didn't want to be a Republican. I would have registered to vote in 1973. I certainly couldn't have supported Nixon. I viewed the Democrats as being more interested in getting out of the war, supporting women's rights, civil rights, the right to protest. But I wasn't particularly politically active when I was 18.

**Debbie** [00:10:28] Okay, let's jump very quickly. You went to college at Tulsa University. How did you get to Texas?

**Sandy** [00:10:38] I had faculty members who were wonderful in Tulsa and really got me on the road to -- I was originally a biology major and I changed to sociology. They basically had a social science degree that was anthropology, sociology, and general social sciences -- political science, I guess. I really became aware of things that I'd never been aware of through college. I always envy other organizers who talk about their experience with their family and unions and how that changed them and that sort of thing. I think I came to it more academically than any personal connection to unions. My grandfather rarely talked about being in the letter carriers union. I mean, he saved all of his pins and I have those. I kept those but it wasn't a thing that we talked about, except in a disparaging way sometimes, when contract negotiations were in Miami with the rubber workers and my grandfather, who was the head of the Chamber of Commerce, would rail about that. But I didn't have that kind of experience. I'm always jealous hearing of people [who] have those sorts of experiences or growing up in homes that had left-wing political ideology. I didn't get to it through that route. But I was part of several different research projects at Tulsa University that looked at different things like segregated housing and those sorts of things. And so I really came to it that way. When I graduated, I went to work for the state of Oklahoma. Up until the late 1970s, all juveniles were housed in big institutions. Debbie worked with me on some things in Oklahoma, so she knows some of the story, but they decided to try to de-institutionalize -- [there] were children that were both in need of supervision and adjudicated delinquents that were housed together. And they were pretty miserable buildings, some of them old, tuberculosis wards in Oklahoma and that sort of

Sandy Rusher – February 22 and 26, 2024

thing. So we opened a group home, the first state-run group home in Oklahoma. That would be [19]78 or [19]79. I worked there for a while and I really decided social work was band-aids over a much bigger problem. Almost all the kids that we had were people who just didn't have parents that could be around because they were working three jobs and they did need supervision, or had financial straits or had some kind of abuse problem because of the situation they were in. I decided I wanted to do structural change rather than band-aid kind of change. It was a moving and worthwhile program. But I do remember we'd sit in staff meetings and decide which of the hundreds of kids that were coming out of institutions -- when they turned eighteen, they'd just take them in a bus and throw them out on the street like they do prisoners. Right? And these were kids that had sometimes been institutionalized since they were twelve, didn't have basic skills. And so we did that. We taught them basic skills of riding a bus and looking in the want ads and cooking a meal and that sort of thing. So it was a good program, but it wasn't what I wanted to do. So I decided to go to graduate school and apply to places. The person who's now my husband -- but was not at the time; we were together -- said, "I'd go to Austin" out of all the places that I was picking to go. And so that's how I decided on UT [University of Texas] Austin.

**Debbie** [00:15:04] Were you married at that point?

**Sandy** [00:15:08] We were living together but not married.

**Debbie** [00:15:09] Okay. You mentioned that when you were at Tulsa University and studying sociology [and] anthropology, it was through your academic reading and coursework that you started to develop a bigger picture of what I'm hearing is class, race -- I don't know if gender was part of that as well. Do you remember any one or two books that were particularly influential in broadening your horizon?

**Sandy** [00:15:41] Yeah, a couple. Why am I forgetting his name? You know it, Debbie. The labor history book that everybody reads. I'm blanking on the name. I'd have to go out and find it.

**Debbie** [00:16:03] A labor history back in the [19]70s -- I'm not so sure --

**Sandy** [00:16:08] It was even older than that.

**Debbie** [00:16:10] Was it Philip Foner's?

**Sandy** [00:16:12] Yes. [Philip S. Foner (1910-1994) wrote the ten-volume *History of the Labor Movement in the United States* and histories of black workers, women workers, and Frederick Douglass, among his 100 books.]

**Debbie** [00:16:13] Okay. Well, you were reading --

**Sandy** [00:16:17] Howard Zinn, *The People's History of the US*. Obviously [Emil] Durkheim, *The Division of Labor* [1983], [Max] Weber -- the classic sociologists really had a lot to say. I still look back at that and think, wow, what a gift to be able to sit around and think about those things and read them and think how it applies to what we're experiencing today. So I think the classics, really.

**Debbie** [00:16:57] Okay. And at this point, you were not involved in an organization.

Sandy Rusher – February 22 and 26, 2024

**Sandy** [00:17:03] As an undergraduate, I did do some community organizing. It wasn't ACORN though I did do an internship with ACORN later when I got to graduate school, but I organized our little neighborhood with a group. I loved that I organized it. Then we got it together, and my husband came to the thing and they pointed to him and said, "He's very gregarious and talks a lot." So everybody decided he should be the president of our neighborhood association. I said, "Yeah, there's something the matter with that." I did all the door knocking and he comes to the meeting, but he's got the charisma that I don't have, I guess. *[Laughs]*

**Debbie** [00:17:54] That's not true. But anyway, let's jump to Texas. You're there in graduate school. And we're going to start now with your union experiences. You were part of the University Employees [Union]. Talk about that and then the decision to affiliate with the Texas State Employees Union.

**Sandy** [00:18:18] Yeah, I think the University Employees Union had been maybe somewhat affiliated with either AFSCME [American Federation of State, County, Municipal Employees] or the Federation of Teachers before I was involved. I guess it was the Federation of Teachers, AFT. But they weren't interested in organizing wall to wall, across the university. It wasn't like we had collective bargaining or anything. And so people before me said, "That doesn't make sense. We should do a wall to wall group." They had already become independent before I joined. I started graduate school in 1980 and I guess I didn't even know about it until [19]82, and joined, and then a year later got on the executive board. We started talking probably a year after that about affiliation. We had a major lawsuit that we always -- we did a lot of fundraisers and that sort of thing. We had started a form of bank draft through the university credit union. We ran elections for the university credit union, and got people elected, and got the ability to get a bank draft through the credit union.

**Debbie** [00:19:34] Explain what that means.

**Sandy** [00:19:36] If people had a credit union account, you could sign up for a thing that automatically deducted your union dues to us, like you could for a car payment or other things like that. So we had a little bit more stable income than you would have if you'd had to be hand-collecting dues.

**Debbie** [00:20:01] UEU stands for what?

**Sandy** [00:20:04] University Employees Union.

**Debbie** [00:20:06] Okay.

**Sandy** [00:20:09] The executive board had people from the library. I was a teaching assistant. We had somebody from the physical plant. We had an administrative secretary. It was a pretty diverse group of people reflecting the people that were in it. We weren't as focused on faculty, but there were faculty supporters that were on the board. And we had a lawsuit that we were funding about a pay raise that the university chose to give to individuals in the positions that they were in at the time, but they didn't give it to the position. So the position didn't receive the raise meaning others subsequently hired into the position did not get hired at the higher wage. So we had a lawsuit that we were trying to fund, which was important because when we affiliated [with] TSEU-CWA, they agreed to fund the lawsuit, which was part of our calculation. So, probably in 1985, we started looking for partners, and had been working with TSEU-CWA, the local of state workers. They had some university workers, and they had been doing a campaign at Stephen F. Austin University for many

Sandy Rusher – February 22 and 26, 2024

years with cafeteria workers and groundskeepers who had been racially discriminated against for years. They were trying to organize as private sector employees, after the university contracted their work out when they became active in TSEU/CWA. We had followed that fight and were just so impressed that an organization was willing to take that on in this little east Texas town.

**Debbie** [00:22:01] What was the name of that --

**Sandy** [00:22:03] Stephen F. Austin University in Nacogdoches, Texas. So there were a lot of things about CWA-TSEU that impressed us. There were some other unions that wanted us. But I remember one public sector union said, "As soon as you all get collective bargaining and payroll deduction for state workers, why don't you come back and talk to us about affiliating?" We said, "Well, how do you think we're going to get from here to there if we don't have a bigger organization backing us?" Anyway, we obviously didn't go with them. So we affiliated in 1986, and it was kind of a critical time to come in to CWA, I think. Larry Cohen had just become the organizing director of CWA -- an incredible visionary and really believed in the model of TSEU. The coordinator of TSEU-CWA had been Eliseo Medina, who went on to SEIU -- also visionary and amazing to work with. But he had left, and literally the day we did the vote count for our affiliation, Danny Fetonte shows up at my apartment where we were doing the vote count, and he had become the coordinator of District 6 [in] CWA as an organizing coordinator, and was going to be in charge of our campaign. [That] would be the major thing that he did. And so I came in to CWA, I think, at just the right time to experience what we viewed as a need to build a bigger, broader labor movement -- one big union. And they did, too.

**Debbie** [00:24:03] Talk a little bit about the TSEU model, why it was so different, and why CWA was interested in supporting TSEU.

**Sandy** [00:24:15] The model was that a union is an organization that people join and participate in and are active in and advocates for the rights of workers. You build power to make change by being part of the organization, with or without formal collective bargaining-- because there was no collective bargaining for public workers [in Texas], and we didn't think that we'd get collective bargaining for a number of years. So it wasn't even like that was the main focus of our work. But that we would have a union, a big union of all state employees, and the umbrella would be big and anybody could join because we didn't have to worry about how to divide people up into bargaining units. A lot of people thought it was a little bit kooky. Some of the [CWA] locals in Texas, the private sector locals were supportive, but a lot of them thought we should break the state up, and the locals could be more supportive by having pieces of the state workers in each geographic local around the state rather than having one big public worker local. I think Larry and Danny both pushed back on that idea that we -- although we did get a lot of support from the private sector, particularly political support. I mean, initially we didn't have any political juice ourselves. We didn't have a political action arm of -- everything was political action, basically. But there was no separate funding for political action. Everything went into dues. And initially, for other state employees -- because they didn't have this option of having the university credit union deduct their dues from their accounts -- we did hand dues collection and later bank draft. So UEU affiliated with TSEU/CWA Local 6186 in 1986. I was on the organizing committee. In [19]87 I went on to the local staff. And we were still collecting dues by hand and writing receipts.

**Debbie** [00:26:46] That's obviously very hard but there's also advantages to that. Talk about that.

Sandy Rusher – February 22 and 26, 2024

**Sandy** [00:26:52] The advantage is -- one is the state didn't know who our membership was. They didn't know how many members we had like you would if you had payroll deduction. But that was true with the credit union, too. So we were trying to figure out, could we do a state employee credit union and do the same thing? We never got to that point. But you have to touch your members every single month, all your members to collect dues. And so it meant very hands on. If you didn't have functioning organizing committees because, maybe if we were lucky, 2 to 5% of your members would come to a meeting that you had monthly -- and so they had to be out, hand collecting dues. You had the organizing committee -- people would have receipts, a receipt book, give people receipts. They'd come in with baggies of cash and coins and that sort of thing to turn the money in. But yeah, just to maintain, you had to touch your members every single month.

**Debbie** [00:27:59] Why was CWA interested in supporting TSEU? CWA then in Texas, I assume, was a telephone worker union.

**Sandy** [00:28:11] It was definitely a telephone worker union. I don't know why -- I'm not sure -- we had an assistant to the vice president at the time. Tommy Parsons was the vice president. Vic Crowley was his assistant. He had come from organizing. Even though the district office was in St. Louis, Missouri, Vic was very committed to a big union and trying different stuff out. Even in the [19]80s -- I know we like to think this is the dark ages of organizing, but even in the [19]80s -- by that time, early [19]90s -- it was getting harder and harder to organize under the NLRA [National Labor Relations Act] and to do something that was a little bit different, that was nontraditional. We had a really good political program in Texas. It sounds crazy, but surprisingly, we did. It wasn't that much later that we elected Ann Richards [Texas governor, 1991-1995]. The truth was, everybody statewide -- all statewide offices -- were Democrat in Texas in the early 1990's. So it wasn't out of the question that that could happen. Our biggest group of members in CWA in District 6 were in Texas. We had some good locals that supported organizing. So I'm not really sure -- I don't know why. I don't know why they decided to do it, but they clearly had made the decision. They were very interested in affiliating us and going into higher education. When the University Employees Union affiliated, they [TSEU-CWA] agreed to take over our lawsuit which we ultimately won. They wanted us to have an organizer and we had somebody from our group that I thought would be wonderful. It was not me.

**Debbie** [00:30:26] Who was it?

**Sandy** [00:30:28] I wanted Travis Donohoe to be the organizer and he did several years later become an organizer as well when CWA started organizing Oklahoma state workers. The only thing I hadn't liked about TSEU when we affiliated, that I had some criticism of, was that they didn't have any women on staff. Well, they had a secretary. I take that back. They did have a female secretary. None of the organizers or the political director were women. Danny Fetonte, who had just taken over as coordinator of the campaign at the time, was like, "Yeah. It's a real problem. And we need to do something about it." From the time we affiliated, [he] tried to get me to be an organizer. It took them about a year and a half after we affiliated for me to do that. And I remember -- I had been doing my dissertation [which] was going to be on gender job segregation. That's what I was working on. I really came to the labor movement through that, as I looked at other countries and looked at how women had improved the situation of the gender gap and job segregation and those sorts of issues -- it was unions. They were heavily unionized. And so, again, I came to my politics, and, ultimately, the union through that. And Danny finally said, "Do you want to be a sociologist who's studying job segregation or do you want to really do something about it?" I decided I wanted to do



Sandy Rusher – February 22 and 26, 2024

something about it. So I never got my PhD. I'm still ABD [all but dissertation]. But I organized some people.

**Debbie** [00:32:18] But you have a PhD in organizing. [*Sandy laughs*] Do you feel like being in the union movement enabled you to do something about gender discrimination in the workplace?

**Sandy** [00:32:34] I do. I do, both from the micro thing of -- By the time I left TSEU, we had a number of women on staff. I remember the first time one of them -- it was actually Judy Graves -- had a baby and she was like, "Oh, I can't come to the staff meeting with a baby." [The meetings] were all day and she'd have to nurse. I was like, "Well, the guys are just going to have to get used to that." And she came and there's the baby. Nobody would look over at her while we were in the staff meeting. But [we] got some great women in and through TSEU that have gone on to national staff in CWA and really made a difference. So I'd say that would be kind of the micro thing -- hiring and developing and paying attention to what it takes to be in this kind of work, field organizing work, and trying to be somebody who maybe had children and had family responsibilities and how you try to balance those things and look at the structural problems of just being in this kind of job. I feel like I did make a difference. And then, in the bigger way, the groups that we were organizing, that we brought into the union -- a lot of them were predominately women. And [we] tried to figure out, Why were those jobs just as important as the technicians out in the field? And that kind of thing. Why did customer service, passenger service work matter? And [we tried to figure out] what we could do and think about the work in a different way -- the structure of the workplace and what kind of things we wanted be advocating for and the type of people we organized. So yeah, I think so.

**Debbie** [00:34:47] As long as we're on this topic, talk about for you -- you had one daughter, Nely. What was it like to be an organizer and raising Nely? How did you balance that?

**Sandy** [00:35:01] Well, it was tricky. It was always tricky. Until she started school, I took her with me a lot. I was working both in Texas and Oklahoma a bunch. We had started a TSEU-like campaign in Oklahoma with state workers, and so I had someone who looked after her in Oklahoma, and someone who looked after her in Texas. I originally got -- this is a little bit negative about CWA, but I'm going to go ahead and say it because I'm sure it's something that a lot of women organizers went through. I'd gone into national staff in [19]91 and had Nely in [19]94. Our staff union contract said that you could take your 12 months of intermittent leave over a 24 month period. So I tried to work what was called -- we didn't have a part-time opportunity for national staff, so I had tried to take part-time, basically. And for me that was working like 40 hours a week part-time to make it manageable. I guess it was about a year and a half into that -- I got approval from everybody to do it, to take my leave -- and somebody in our staff union executive board objected and started saying that I was working part-time and there was no provision for part-time, even though the national union had been paying me half salary for a year and a half, and everyone had signed off on it. They [the staff union] objected to the CWA human resource person who then advised me that if I didn't come back to work full-time within a week and a half, I'd be fired. And so I said, "Since I'm really working full-time, I'll let you pay me for full-time." And I came back, came back to work full-time. But by that time, I'd gotten through the first year and a half, somewhat managing. I have to say, the men and women that I worked with—the other organizers, the members, the people we were organizing -- were so supportive and helped me through the whole thing. But she [Nely] traveled with me. I remember my husband being flipped out [when] he learned that I was in front of a prison with Nely in a sack in front of me while I was handing out flyers. And I said, "It's probably the safest place you can be. There are people up above with shotguns. I don't know that I'd be in any

Sandy Rusher – February 22 and 26, 2024

safer place." But she was a good traveler and a good sport. And so it was a rude awakening when she had to go to school and I had to quit taking her with me. But we got through it. My mother was a huge help, both coming to my house and traveling with me sometimes. My sister, and of course my husband, [were also big helps]. It was challenging to do this work and be a mom.

**Debbie** [00:38:14] Sandy, there's so much in your life as an organizer that I want to cover, but I'm going to jump back to two key campaigns at TSEU that I'd like you to talk about. First, I want you to talk about the Stephen F. Austin in Nacogdoches campaign for the cafeteria workers --

**Sandy** [00:38:41] Cafeteria workers, yes.

**Debbie** [00:38:42] -- and definitely about the Jobs with Justice march.

**Sandy** [00:38:47] Danny Fetonte -- before he became the district coordinator for the national union, he was an organizer in east Texas with TSEU and met this group that had been fighting [with the] NAACP supporting them. The local NAACP chapter had been fighting at Stephen F. Austin for years about the discrimination when workers would apply for jobs at Stephen F. Austin and no matter if you had a Library of Science degree or whatever, you were funneled into either cafeteria worker or groundskeeper.

**Debbie** [00:39:28] If you were African-American.

**Sandy** [00:39:30] If you were African-American. So they had Annie Mae Carpenter and several others, but she was the lead on the lawsuit with the NAACP. [They] had filed a lawsuit [and] were trying to fight it legally. But the NAACP—the chapter president Arthur Weaver -- said, "We need a union here. We're not big enough and we don't have the resources to fight this state university." Danny Fetonte was the first organizer to go in there and they started organizing. The main source of organizing was in those two units, the groundskeepers and the cafeteria workers. The university decided they could get rid of the problem by contracting out the cafeteria workers. They contracted out to ARA. And Danny said, "Okay, we'll organize them as private sector workers." It took years under the NLRB, to -- first they said, "They're not private workers -- they're not private sector workers." So we said, "Okay, we'll just keep signing them up in TSEU and advocating that way." Then they ruled that they weren't public workers. Then they ruled that they were workers of a new kind, neither public nor private. So they didn't have the rights -- in Texas, weirdly, we used the Texas right-to-work law to organize because in the Texas right-to-work law -- and we had lawsuits that we won, because they fired people for their union organizing -- but the Texas right-to-work law basically says, and this is paraphrasing, that you have the right to join or not join a union. So we said, "We have the right to join a union. It says so in the Texas right-to-work law." So we actually got people their jobs back and we got back pay and that kind of thing under the Texas right-to-work law. So they said neither law counted and they were workers of a new kind. It took quite a long time of TSEU-CWA supporting those workers. Finally, it was determined they were private sector workers. Danny organized them. We won that election, even after they fired the top third of our leadership in the unit. Then we tried to bargain a contract. They stalled and stalled and did everything they could to continue to try to discourage and demoralize the workers there.

And again, I feel like I came into CWA at just the right time. Larry Cohen and George Kohl and others had formed this national organization called Jobs with Justice. It was either the first or second big event that Jobs with Justice had in Nacogdoches right after I'd come to work for TSEU in

June of 1987. Danny said, "We're going to have this giant thing in December, the weekend before Christmas in Nacogdoches where we're going to bus people in from all over the place and have thousands of people marching in the streets in Nacogdoches to bring attention to what's happening in this little town in east Texas." A lot of us were like, "Oh, there's no way people are getting on a bus on a cold day the weekend before Christmas and going." Besides organizing, we were selling tickets, and instead of giving free buses and stuff, Danny was always [believed] -- and it's a throw-back to our lobby days -- if people had to actually buy a ticket, they were more likely to come rather than saying, "We have a free bus and a free lunch and whatever to get there." So he's like, "We're going to sell tickets and make people commit to being there on a certain day." It was amazing that day. We had buses from Arkansas and Missouri and Louisiana, buses coming in from all over the place to be there for that event. It was a huge march, down the main street at Nacogdoches onto campus. I don't think anything like that had ever been there before. And Morty Bahr, our international president, and Larry, politicians and supporters from all over came to it and spoke. But mostly, it was the speakers that had endured all the years of discrimination from the campus. It wasn't long after that that it broke, and the attention was not favorable for Stephen F. Austin. We finally got a contract there. We still, to this day, represent this small group of food service workers on the Stephen F. Austin campus. Ultimately, [we] settled that lawsuit, the Annie Mae Carpenter lawsuit, where workers finally got back pay. I remember going there and handing out the checks to the workers as they came in. When Annie Mae came in, it was quite emotional. I'm going to get emotional thinking about it now. I said, "This check is piddly -- it's not nearly worth what you deserve." And she said, "Honey, I never thought I'd see a penny from this university." She said, "This is a sweet day for me." I always remember that. It wasn't the amount of money. It was the victory, of both having a union there and finally the company had to acknowledge that they'd done something wrong.

**Debbie** [00:45:34] Do you remember how much the check was for?

**Sandy** [00:45:36] I don't remember. I wish I did. Larry Daves, our attorney who worked there for years and is a special person -- he'd know all the amounts for everybody. But it was a lot of people coming through. Basically everybody said the same thing, that it was -- even she probably got the most because she had worked there a long period of time. Some of the checks were almost nothing, but it didn't matter. People came and picked them up and probably some people framed them.

**Debbie** [00:46:15] And this whole campaign cemented a strong relationship between CWA and the NAACP in Texas?

**Sandy** [00:46:24] Yes. Yeah, we had that. We've had that all along.

**Debbie** [00:46:31] I want you also to talk about the dues check-off campaign.

**Sandy** [00:46:34] I want to say, NOW, the National Organization for Women chapter out there, also was very involved in it. It was a very cool coalition. I think it was those kinds of fights -- we had the most amazing collection of organizers in TSEU that I can imagine. It was the other magical thing about working there at the time. It was people with big ideologies. Big egos, a lot of them -- but had opinions about how to do this new kind of organizing -- or actually, isn't new. It harkens back to the way the workers used to organize. But we had the most fun, exciting, crazy staff meetings of people expressing their opinion. And luckily, Danny Fetonte was one of those people who liked to fight with you, in a good way. He liked a good argument based on something. And so we

Sandy Rusher – February 22 and 26, 2024

were allowed to -- we'd have two-day staff meetings that were crazy, but you would leave with all these ideas and thoughts in your head about all that was said. So it was kind of a heady time to be there with both Jobs with Justice, the organizers -- but those kinds of fights attracted people. We got Mike Gross, who later came onto national staff, but he was in TSEU for a long time, then the coordinator of TSEU -- those sorts of people. He came out of that fight. He'd been active in both NOW and the NAACP at Stephen F. Austin University. And so we got a lot of people wanting to come and be part, if not full-time, an activist or -- because we were willing to wage those kinds of David and Goliath fights.

**Debbie** [00:48:42] Sounds like you're talking about social movement unionism.

**Sandy** [00:48:47] Right. Yes.

**Debbie** [00:48:49] Any other names that you want to mention that you haven't already who were key people in this period or that came out of TSEU?

**Sandy** [00:48:59] Well, really, all of the people. I got to start organizing with a guy named Jim Branson [who] came out of the Mine Workers union, and it was such a different social -- I've talked to you some about my experience with unions [when I was] younger. For his life, it was before the union and after the union. I mean, it was really AU and BU. He couldn't understand that you had to talk people into wanting to have a union, if you had a union available. So he and I, we had the whole northern part of Texas from east Texas to west Texas that we traveled together, probably the first month or two. It's a lot of driving time that we got to spend learning about each other and each other's history. But [he] taught me so much about living and growing up and being steeped in union history and union songs and union culture and values. So I loved working with him. It was such a different experience for me.

**Debbie** [00:50:11] Was he from Texas?

**Sandy** [00:50:13] He was from West Virginia.

**Debbie** [00:50:14] Oh, okay.

**Sandy** [00:50:15] He did go back for a while and start -- we did start at the TSEU-like organization in West Virginia. It kind of branched out to many, many different places and still is branching out [with] our university campus workers organizing all across the -- I can't even keep up with all the places that we've built out campus worker organizing in this model, even since I left.

**Debbie** [00:50:42] As you continued in your organizing in [the] private sector -- American Airlines, the wireless, etc. -- were there lessons you learned at TSEU that you were able to bring to those campaigns?

**Sandy** [00:50:57] Yeah. I think that when I organized, I never focused people on "What are we going to get in our contract?" It wasn't about having a contract, although it was. I mean, they had collective bargaining rights and that sort of thing, but it was about building. How do you build power and how do you get power in a workplace? And what does it mean to be a member, and how do you get people involved, and what are the steps and levels of involvement? We had a whole manual at TSEU. We developed a manual for organizing. We actually did organizing trainings. We tried to do

Sandy Rusher – February 22 and 26, 2024

social events at our union organizations. We really tried to harken back to what -- and that's why I mentioned Jim Branson. You think of what the whole social connection that unions used to be for people. I learned that in a number of different ways, organizing with people who had been steeped in that, but also talking to people about how you build this bigger thing without the hope of collective bargaining. So even though the wireless, the private sector organizing was ultimately about getting collective bargaining, it's not the way we tried to organize and talk specifically about contract language or, "If you get a union, you'll get just cause and due process." It wasn't about specific things you get in the contract. I think it developed my organizing -- I think it helped create an organizing focus that not everybody had if they had grown up and organized in New York, where it was all about collective bargaining and getting the contract, and what you get at the end of it, rather than through the process of doing it.

**Debbie** [00:53:04] Do you want to add anything more about TSEU or should we move on?

**Sandy** [00:53:09] I think the other big fight was, we did finally get payroll deduction. So politically, we worked very hard in political campaigns. By the last year I was the coordinator of TSEU, we decided to double down on getting payroll deduction. I have to say, I was a little bit reluctant about putting all of our political eggs in that. I said, You didn't have to go home, visit very long in Texas to see the horrible shape that state workers were in and the poverty they were living in, understaffing, unacceptable working conditions, inability to provide the services they wanted to provide to people who needed them. I said, "If we try to get payroll deduction, we have to go all in. And that's the only thing we get." The legislative sessions in Texas are every two years. But I was finally convinced that, organizationally, it was important enough that we make that kind of stability and resources a top priority. We were never going to get the other victories without a stronger organization. We did help get Ann Richards elected, and other people that we thought that, the speaker of the House, the lieutenant governor -- who's basically the head of the Senate in Texas -- Bob Bullock. And in 1990 or [19]91, we got payroll deduction. Our membership in TSEU doubled in the next couple of years after that.

**Debbie** [00:54:47] Doubled from about what to --

**Sandy** [00:54:49] We had about 5,000 when I was the coordinator, and then I went onto national staff. It went to about 10,000 pretty quickly without having -- by that time, we were really trying to get people off of -- not pay cash, go onto bank draft, the bank draft system, and do it through their bank accounts. A lot of people earn so little that they didn't have a bank account. And so that didn't work for everybody. And really, it wasn't until the state required you get your paycheck automatically deposited and people had to open bank accounts to get their paycheck automatically deposited that we were able to get more people onto bank draft. But I think we got payroll deduction in [19]91. And organizationally, it did make a big difference.

**Debbie** [00:55:51] And just to give those who might be reading this or listening to it a sense of what 12,000 members in the state of Texas meant -- about how many people were state workers in Texas at that time?

**Sandy** [00:56:07] Oh, I think I want to say 100,000 state workers and another 100,000 at universities, higher education.

**Debbie** [00:56:13] So your membership was about 10% of the potential.

Sandy Rusher – February 22 and 26, 2024

**Sandy** [00:56:19] Yeah, more or less.

**Debbie** [00:56:20] And so you had to generate power beyond your numbers.

**Sandy** [00:56:28] Yes, yes. And our political power -- we really rode the coattails for a long time. I'm glad to say, at this point, TSEU is also a major funder of our political action, the CWA political action fund, and gets our members involved in the campaigns. But we rode the coattails of the private sector, especially telco members, for a long time, politically.

**Debbie** [00:56:55] And CWA supporting TSEU was part of CWA, at that point, expanding beyond just telephone. So you were also part of the transformation of the union.

**Sandy** [00:57:09] Yes.

**Debbie** [00:57:09] And I assume that could have been a challenge at some point.

**Sandy** [00:57:14] Yeah. It was and it continues to be because TSEU is still the largest local in District 6. And at a certain point we became able to be full members and vote in all the elections and that kind of thing. And so you come with internal CWA political power and those voting rights and things. And so it does become controversial at different points.

**Debbie** [00:57:52] Okay, I'm ready if you are to move on to when you went onto CWA staff and some of those campaigns.

**Sandy** [00:58:01] Okay. I went onto CWA staff in [19]91. Danny and I were the two organizing coordinators in District 6. And the big things we were working on, besides continuing to support these state workers in Missouri, Oklahoma and Texas -- in Missouri, they did have a form of meet and confer and bargaining units. And there were some other unions involved, but -- cable workers and wireless workers -- so Southwestern Bell, which was the regional Bell Operating Company in our district. In CWA our districts only makes sense if you know something about the history of the Regional Bell Operating Companies. So we were the old Southwestern Bell -- it had been two different companies, but anyway -- ultimately, we were the old Southwestern Bell. It was right when I came onto national staff that they were really building out their wireless. It started relatively small, but all of a sudden it became clear that wireless was the growing part of the company. Those jobs were not included in our collective bargaining agreements. They had developed a separate subsidiary. We had to organize some of the other subsidiaries of Southwestern Bell. I don't even know if I should say this, but I guess if it's history, we should say it. A little known fact is the company had come to us at one point -- it was a small number of workers, I don't know, maybe a couple of hundred -- and offered us recognition. And a staff rep at that time, who I won't name, had turned Southwestern Bell down because it seemed like a small group of people and wasn't anything and who knew where the technology was going.

**Debbie** [01:00:08] These were wireless workers?

**Sandy** [01:00:10] Wireless workers.

**Debbie** [01:00:11] I never heard this story.

**Sandy** [01:00:13] Yeah, yeah. Anyway, we didn't represent them, but it was growing and building and growing and building. Our District 6 vice-president, by that time was Vic Crawley. We had a decent relationship with the company SBC, I'd say -- like the kind of relationship where Vic would play golf with the labor relations person. Every year when we had our district convention, they did the hospitality room. Anyway, we fought when we had to, but it was also a comfortable position. They had those old -- you may remember in the [19]90s, I guess late [19]80s, they started labor-management committees, that you worked out things beyond the contract -- how do you get workers to come to work and resolve issues so they would avoid discipline? -- that sort of thing, where you try to work together with the company on mutually beneficial things. So we'd had a decent relationship with the company up until it was clear that they were building out wireless in a bigger way. Vic went to a thing with the company where they talked about the future of the company in the next ten to twenty years, and they basically said that -- I think, by that time -- I'm going to get this a little bit wrong, but -- either 20 or 30% of the revenue is coming in from wireless and 80 or 70% from wireline, and that would be reversed in the next fifteen years. It didn't take Vic long to figure out that that meant that's where the workers were going to be in the next fifteen to twenty years. And [he] said, "We have to do something about it." We met with the company, tried to get some sort of organizing rights agreement. They wouldn't do it at the time. One group was actually co-located with our folks in a building in St. Louis. And so one of the big St. Louis locals started talking to people on smoke breaks and that kind of thing. We did an organizing campaign there. The company did run an anti-union campaign. We were surprised, tried to use our relationship with them to stop the campaign. It didn't stop. And we ended up winning that election in spite of the anti-union campaign, but as we tried to organize other places [which] were mostly single retail locations -- where, at that point, the way that it was organized was by -- what were they called, Debbie?

**Debbie** [01:03:19] MSAs, or --

**Sandy** [01:03:20] Yeah. Metropolitan Service Areas. Yeah. So we organized -- sometimes it would be two retail locations in the city. At each retail location, they were fully functioning and they had technicians. So that was the time of the big phones that you would install in your car. They had technicians that did the installation. They had drive-through garages and in the stores they'd have customer service, inside and outside sales. Basically, everything was at a store. So we tried to start organizing the stores and we got a real push back. All of a sudden, this company that we'd had a relationship with -- we thought -- started calling us very ugly things and talked about us as third party outsiders. We knew we were going to have to do something broader to involve our members, to push back on the company, if we were going to get anywhere. So we started a campaign for neutrality and --

**Debbie** [01:04:25] Explain neutrality.

**Sandy** [01:04:28] So [neutrality was] where the company would agree to let the workers decide on their own, without company interference, if they wanted to be in a union or not. Over the next five years -- well, anyway. So we started that. Danny actually was the person who coined the term "We're going to lose to win," that we know there will be an all-out fight. With these small units of retail workers, sometimes no more than twenty people, it was easy for the company to turn a few people. I mean, the company was doing the big things like all companies do, but they were also really targeting individual workers. So as we drew out the anti-union campaign, it would be like -- they'd talk to Theresa and say, "Theresa, I know you have a special needs child [who] really needs

our health insurance. You know, go ask the union. When you organize a union, everything is up for bargaining. You could lose something. You could gain something. Hate for you to lose this health care for your special needs child." These are real stories. It was those sorts of things. In a small workplace-- with relatively high turnover -- that you could quickly lose majority support, if they turned a few people-- and they would hold up each election. You try to do a retail store, they held it up about whether or not a single retail location was an appropriate unit. There were Metropolitan Service Areas, but there were also these Regional Service Areas. The company would argue we had to do a whole Regional Service Area that were spread across hundreds of miles, that outside sales shouldn't be included with inside sales. People who dealt with the agent -- anyway, so they'd hold it up forever disputing the unit, while there was huge turnover. They were doing these very personalized anti-union things. And so Danny said, "We'll probably lose a bunch of elections, but that's okay, because we're going to flesh out the anti-union campaign. We're going to take it to our members. We're going to show our members how this is not the same company that we're used to. They're not our friends. We shouldn't be participating with them in these nice labor-management meetings and having their shrimp and beer at our conferences. And we need to fight in every avenue that --" And mostly, participating with them -- this was when regulation of telecommunications was still pretty heavy and especially in Texas, where we were very politically active. But other states in our district, they needed our help politically, and they always counted on it. They could get most of the Republican vote, and we could get a lot of the Democratic vote, and they could get things passed. Every state had a Public Utility Commission that regulated the industry. Some of them were elected and some of them were appointed. But still, the regulatory mechanisms were also available. So we started running campaigns -- "Lose to Win" -- that we might lose some elections. We weren't going to be embarrassed about that. We would flesh out the anti-union campaign, take it to our membership, and get people excited about -- disgusted, I would say -- about how the company was behaving, that we were friends over here and enemies over here. We call it the "Five Years to Card Check" now in CWA and we have a little booklet written about it. Five Years to Card Check from [19]92 to [19]7 in District 6, where we had a heavy concentration on wireless organizing. We would try to start campaigns wherever we could, wherever we had a local that really wanted to organize and be part of it. We'd do workshops at every opportunity that we could with our locals to show them the campaign.

**Debbie** [01:08:41] I'm going to intervene for a second because this is a good time to talk about your -- I will say yours and Danny's and CWA's and Larry's -- strategy about how you organize, in terms of getting the local involved and building committees. How did you do that in the wireless organizing?

**Sandy** [01:09:05] Yeah. We tried to use what CWA's organizing model was, even though we knew that --

**Debbie** [01:09:12] Which was? Explain it.

**Sandy** [01:09:12] Which was that you find leaders inside, you train them and involve them in the organizing, you build what's called an internal organizing committee. We'd start by training the local, getting the local prepared for what to expect, having the local look through their own membership. There were people who had lost jobs with Southwestern Bell Telephone that went over to Southwestern Bell Wireless -- so doing a scan of their own membership, seeing if there was anybody that was over there, going deep with the local to prepare them and to train a local organizing committee to help support the work. Because we had campaigns from Tulsa, Oklahoma to Abilene,



Sandy Rusher – February 22 and 26, 2024

Texas to Corpus Christi, Texas -- even the Texas part of it was pretty big. We had stuff going on all around the district with numerous locals. So we trained locals in the organizing process, then they would work to find people inside -- wireless workers -- to find leaders, to build organizing committees, and then start talking to workers internally, doing what we call "assessments" of workers about whether or not they were supporters -- neutral, in between, or definitely anti -- and then decide if we were trying to move a campaign forward to an election. We also taught them a lot about how important it was to document the anti-union campaign, because we were trying to -- the company kept saying, "We don't need any kind of agreement because we're neutral. We don't care if you unionize or not. We're used to dealing with a union work force." And in fact, the head of Southwestern Bell had come out of the actual workforce of Southwestern Bell. [He] had been a line technician and his brother still was. So they were like, "We're not anti-union."

**Debbie** [01:11:25] Ed Whitacre, right?

**Sandy** [01:11:29] Ed Whitacre. So not only were we trying to organize, we were trying to build and document a case that showed that they [Southwestern Bell] were anti-union, that they were running it, that this wasn't a supervisor here and a supervisor there who was off track, off course, but they were running a campaign that was coordinated by Southwestern Bell, and that they had actually hired a union-buster to run it. It was the same campaign everywhere.

**Debbie** [01:12:01] And so educating the unionized telephone workers was as much a part of the program as reaching out to the wireless workers.

**Sandy** [01:12:13] Right. We actually started a committee of some of the local CWA presidents in District 6 that could help lead it and talk other locals into using it and, most importantly, come up with other ideas. I remember one of the first meetings we had, JD Williams -- who was the president of the big Dallas local and also the president of the Texas political action [committee] -- he said, "Well, they're asking us to help here, here, and here, right now, on political stuff." He said, "We should use that as leverage." And Danny and I are like, "Yeah, we should." And the District vice-president agreed that we should, that we had to explain to our members why getting this thing done politically might be better for our current members and bring a few jobs in, but in the big scheme of things, if we don't get the wireless jobs it's going to be very serious for our future, and why we had to work for the future jobs and not just for the immediate jobs -- union jobs -- and why that was important. So this ad hoc committee that we pulled together for organizing, I think, was critical.

**Debbie** [01:13:46] How many paid organizers were on this campaign?

**Sandy** [01:13:53] Well, Danny and I were the only full-time people that were on the campaign. But CWA's program is helping support locals develop organizing campaigns. The hope is that you go, "Hey, you've got a call center in your area, San Antonio, you have a wireless call center in addition to a few retail stores. And they've done organizing on and off. And we'll help you put resources into it. We'll help you develop local organizers who then, hopefully, can run other campaigns in your community." So most of CWA's organizing budget still goes to supporting locals doing their own organizing and developing local organizing staff. So we had Danny and I, and then a lot of local organizers that we worked with that were partially paid for through CWA organizing funds.

**Debbie** [01:14:56] So they were pulled off the job for part-time to work on it?

**Sandy** [01:15:02] Yes.

**Debbie** [01:15:03] Ultimately, what happened at the end of the campaign? And what pushed it over the edge?

**Sandy** [01:15:08] We negotiated four or five iterations of neutrality agreements. The first one was a paragraph with a lot of nice language but not anything specific, to one that had arbitration, to one that is mostly intact today with more specific language. Anyway, as we built on them and the company kept running the anti-union campaign, and we -- even doing "Lose to Win" -- we probably won about half of the elections that we ran in. Then the company wanted to do a few things, sometimes settling a bunch of the NLRB elections -- like in Abilene, we got a form of card check/neutrality, where all workers had to do was sign a card saying they wanted to be in the union, and if you did it within a certain period of time and a third party validated those cards, they would get recognition without going through an election. And then in Houston, the same thing, the big Houston local, because the company wanted to buy another wireless company and set up shop, we negotiated an organizing rights agreement just for the Houston area. Anyway, we got a little piece of card check there while we were working under different agreements in the district and other places. We showed that card check could work and it could be much less volatile and hostile and we could remain having a relationship in that process.

**Debbie** [01:16:53] Can you explain? Oh, I interrupted you. Finish --

**Sandy** [01:16:54] No. That's okay. Anyway, without going through all that --

**Debbie** [01:16:56] I want you to explain what card check is.

**Sandy** [01:17:00] So, card check is when instead of signing a card to move to an election, you ask people, "Do you want to have a union?" And if you do, the way you vote to have a union is by signing a card. The card was very clear. If I sign this card -- and the language was developed with the company, so that workers knew exactly what they were signing. If I sign this card, I'm saying I want to be represented by CWA. I want to be a member of CWA. I want collective bargaining in my workplace. This is my vote to be part of the union. So that there's not like -- in typical private sector union elections, you sign what's called a representation card, which authorizes an election, and then you can request recognition from the company with majority support, the company turns you down because they want to fight against your majority support, and you have to go through another election. So this is basically with majority sign up recognition, the worker signs the card that they want to be a member, and they want to be part of it, and they definitely want to be represented, and there is no additional election process you have to go through. And it can be different percentages. I think in Abilene we had to get to 60%. Maybe in Houston it was a higher percentage. Ultimately, after five years, we signed an agreement that was over 50% of the bargaining unit at the time you start signing cards, and you had to sign the cards within a 60 day period of time. And the company would not interfere in any way. They would do a training of their supervisors and managers to make sure that supervisors and managers didn't do it, and supervisors and managers were accountable to them. We had a contact person in the company and with us that would report anything if there was a supervisor that got carried away with their own opinions. The managers and supervisors literally couldn't even give their own opinions. They had to tell the workers, "You make the decision for yourself." And if you decide that, then we will recognize your decisions.

**Debbie** [01:19:18] So neutrality is really the key.

**Sandy** [01:19:23] Neutrality and the right to join in that way, the right to sign up in that way. The extensive -- the way that the NLRA allows elections to be perverted -- the NLRB process, which is an extensive period of time -- before we'd ever go into an organizing campaign, we had agreed with the company what the units were, what we had to organize, [and] who would be included. We got lists of names. So there was no question about it. You didn't have to have the huge period of time between, normally in a campaign when you file for an election and ultimately get to an election. In small units, like retail units, it can be a completely different group of people that are voting than originally said they wanted a union. It's really impressive that Starbucks and these small locations that are now organizing under the National Labor Relations Act -- those are very hard to do if you have a lengthy time between the time you file [and the time you get an election].

**Debbie** [01:20:36] Just to make it clear -- that is because --

**Sandy** [01:20:41] The company has a right to oppose whatever unit you file for. So even though it could be [that] there's precedent, the NLRB has already said a single retail location is an appropriate unit -- under the NLRA, it says you only have to file for an appropriate unit, not the most appropriate unit or the only appropriate unit. So the law actually should give you the ability to file for almost anything unless it's really crazy. But it also allows the company to delay, delay, delay, delay through the process. And it gives them longer to work on employees individually and as a group, and also to change what the bargaining unit is.

**Debbie** [01:21:29] So let's just put an end to the "Five Years to Card Check" campaign. What happened at the end? And why?

**Sandy** [01:21:40] Well, at the end we got this agreement and were able to organize all the wireless workers in our district, with the exception of a few. We had agreed that outside sales, which were called account executives -- who they had really tried to exclude from the unit -- but because we'd had to have NLRB elections earlier, we'd agreed that NLRB decisions would be the barometer that we use for what units would be. We finally agreed to card check/neutrality, with account executives having to decide separately from the larger unit if they wanted to be in. And so everybody, with exception of a few small groups of account executives, quickly chose to be represented -- when you had the opportunity to do it without a company campaign, and without being threatened and harassed and intimidated.

**Debbie** [01:22:39] This was 1997. What was going on in terms of corporate change with Southwestern Bell in 1997?

**Sandy** [01:22:49] They were having mergers all around the country. And again, this goes back to the regulatory process. You're gonna have to help me, but Pac Bell, I think -- was that the first big one that they got for an RBOC [merger]?

**Debbie** [01:23:04] 1997 is when Southwestern Bell and Pacific Bell filed for merger. And they had to be approved by not only the FCC [Federal Communications Commission] at the federal level, but the California Public Utility Commission, which was a high road to climb.

Sandy Rusher – February 22 and 26, 2024

**Sandy** [01:23:27] And again, our union in California -- also politically active -- had to really jump in and decide that it was better for them to be part of Southwestern Bell and have neutrality on wireless jobs and other jobs. The truth was, the first unit we organized under the card check agreement was a cable group. Southwestern Bell was going into broadband and cable. And we organized it. It was a relatively small cable unit in Dallas that I'd been working with for a while. I kept telling the inside organizing committee, "Hold off, hold off. I think we're going to have something where you're going to be able to organize without going through hell." A number of them had been in cable campaigns with other cable companies in the Texas area that I'd been involved with. I said, "Remember how horrible those elections were? Well, we're going to not have to do that if you give us another six months." So the first group we organized under the new agreement was the Southwestern Bell broadband unit.

CWA jumped in and helped support the merger in California. And as Southwestern Bell became the little RBOC that ate all the other RBOCs -- Regional Bell Operating Companies -- around the country, that same thing happened-- BellSouth, Ameritech, Southern New England Telephone, and then later they bought [other] wireless companies.

**Debbie** [01:25:25] And ultimately, AT&T.

**Sandy** [01:25:28] And ultimately, AT&T.

**Debbie** [01:25:30] And renamed itself AT&T. So at its height, how many wireless workers did CWA represent, approximately? After all of these mergers [in which] CWA got the expansion of the card check/neutrality.

**Sandy** [01:25:50] I'm trying to think. I believe when I left, four and a half years ago, we were over 40,000. That included DirecTV. They bought DirecTV as well. But between all their mergers, we represented over 40,000 workers in the wireless [arm]. DirecTV went into the wireless arm. Yeah.

**Debbie** [01:26:14] A very proud achievement for you, and Danny, and Vic Crawley, and all of the activists who were part of this campaign.

**Sandy** [01:26:24] It was Larry's[Cohen] -- we used to have annual organizer retreats, and this was Larry's vision. He said all of us had to go into our districts and start moving this, using the existing power we had in the represented telephone companies to bargain for and fight for organizing rights. People did try to do it. I think we both had some regulatory hooks that maybe some people didn't have. And we had Vic as a vice-president who was super committed to it and was willing to -- I remember times when [Vic Crawley] would tell Danny and me, "I don't really want to know what you're doing. I have to maintain a relationship with the company. I still have a relationship with labor relations. You all have to do what you have to do." Sometimes we'd call and say -- it was a Friday afternoon. Maybe you want to get out of the office so you can't take calls And we'd go do some crazy thing in front of some of the retail stores or that sort of thing that they'd go wild about. But we did have fairly free rein to raise hell where we thought we needed to. We were all given the charge by Larry to -- it was clear where the industry was growing. And Debbie [Goldman] in the research department did a ton of research that really helped guide us, to help figure out what the jobs would be, and where they were, and what we needed to do, and if there were regulatory and political angles, and the wireless part of it -- that was pretty deregulated, except for giving them Metropolitan Service Areas. They had to have two carriers in each Metropolitan Service Area at the time or some-

Sandy Rusher – February 22 and 26, 2024

thing. But anyway, Debbie actually knows the deep research on the industry better than I do. But yeah, it was a major feat. We had no way of knowing -- we also were lucky. Who knew that Southwestern Bell was going to be the one that ended up being the new AT&T, so that it did apply in other places.

**Debbie** [01:28:40] Yeah. I think that this is -- first of all -- fabulous. Sandy, you tell these stories so well. I think we have ten more minutes. We will need to reschedule to complete this. I'm interested in the next block being about the American Airlines campaign. I don't know if you want to start on that -- or should we just stop now and pick up with that when we talk next time?

**Sandy** [01:29:15] Oh, I'm good any way.

**Debbie** [01:29:21] Why don't we start? And at 10:15, we'll stop.

**Sandy** [01:29:26] Okay.

**Debbie** [01:29:30] Okay. So how --

**Sandy** [01:29:30] The top line on American Airlines is that it was a group of passenger service workers who for over 18 years along with CWA fought for a union. They went through 3 elections, 9-11, a bankruptcy, mergers, and a sophisticated and relentless anti-union campaign. But they won in the end. I'm going to name drop a little bit more, then, because we started in the airline industry with US Airways passenger service agents. I want to say that was [19]94 or [19]95. I didn't have that much US Airways in District 6. It wasn't a big airline in my area. I had six airports, I guess, with relatively small groups and no call center. The passenger service group in airlines -- let me start with that -- are people who work at airports, at ticket counters and gates, in big legacy airlines -- people who do lost baggage -- so when you lose your baggage and you have to call someplace and find out where your bags [are], it's that group of people -- and customer service reps who do the ticketing at call centers, which is where our initial -- so people who worked at call centers initially contacted us in a couple of places at US Airways because they were like, "Oh, that's the union that organizes customer service workers and call center workers." We originally got our contacts from there at US Airways. Rick Braswell, who was a District Organizing Coordinator but worked out of the national office and helped run national campaigns, sort of as assistant to Larry, but never had that title. He was a district organizer like the rest of us. He ran the national Sprint campaign, which Debbie [Goldman] has written on extensively. And he ran this campaign really brilliantly, and really brought both CWA's online presence and campaign literature to a whole new level. So we started at US Airways --

**Debbie** [01:31:56] Can I stop you, Sandy? Because people who are listening to this will say, "Okay. CWA was a telephone worker union. Wireless makes sense. Maybe even public workers in Texas. But why the airlines? And how did CWA decide to pour resources into this? And why?"

**Sandy** [01:32:26] Yeah. It's not only a new field for us. It was a different law. It was under the Railway Labor Act, which has completely different organizing rules and bargaining unit issues. So it was a real difference for us, except that over half the workers you don't see when you go to airports for customer service -- they're the people that are on the telephones doing customer service work. And we are a customer service union. We had been, even during that time, really promoting ourselves as the union for the Information Age, customer service. So it was a broad thing, and that

Sandy Rusher – February 22 and 26, 2024

is where the initial context came from -- customer service call center workers. That was the way we were led into it. Some were former members had actually lost jobs in telecom when call centers closed down in their area. They'd gone to work for these [airlines] call centers. Or parents who had children -- customer service workers for the phone company who had children who had gone to work for the airlines. So we had a lot of connection with that kind of work. We'd been bargaining on issues that they were having, from secret monitoring to the speed-ups to the -- we could go into all the issues, but all the issues that customer service workers were having, these workers were having at US Airways.

**Debbie** [01:34:11] You weren't that involved in the US Airways election, so let's just stipulate -- after a long time and several elections, CWA did win the election to represent US Airways. You got involved then because American was merging with US Airways, correct? Or had they already merged?

**Sandy** [01:34:33] No.

**Debbie** [01:34:33] Okay.

**Sandy** [01:34:33] That was a lot later. The merger [took place] many years later. I got involved because American workers had been trying to organize. They'd been working with the Teamsters for a while. They hadn't gotten anywhere. They hadn't gotten to an election. They were watching our US Airway campaign, when we'd be in airports. That was when you used to be able to walk through airports freely. There was no security. You didn't have to have a ticket to get in. Many people will listen to this and not even know that that was the case at one point. There were customers walking up and down, so you could walk up and down airports and talk to customer service agents, and nobody would pay any attention. They thought you were asking a question about the flight. It was kind of fun organizing -- well, it was actually very fun organizing. So in the process of organizing US Airways, American agents had contacted us, were interested. We said, "Let's get through this campaign." We were taking names and gathering contacts. And at other airlines -- United and Delta. We were getting contacts from many passenger service agents. It's a very heavily organized industry, except customer service.

**Debbie** [01:35:57] And by then, had the flight attendants joined CWA?

**Sandy** [01:36:02] They didn't join until -- I want to say 2004 [late 2003]. I did work with them in 2001 on their Delta campaign, just as a support person. They had a base in Dallas at the time and in Houston, and I was working a lot in airports in Texas. So I worked with them, in a friendly way, to help organize, but I think it was 2004.

**Debbie** [01:36:31] Okay, so back --

**Sandy** [01:36:32] Around there. So back to this --

**Debbie** [01:36:35] Yeah. I think we should probably stop now.

**Sandy** [01:36:39] Okay.

**Debbie** [01:36:40] I'm going to stop the --

Sandy Rusher – February 22 and 26, 2024

**Sandy** [01:36:41] Let me finish this part.

**Debbie** [01:36:44] Good, good, good.

**Sandy** [01:36:45] After we had the election at US Airways, we had like 300 American agents sign a petition saying basically, "Please help us organize. Your campaign at US Airways was fantastic and we want that too." So we started meeting with them after we got a petition asking us to.

**Debbie** [01:37:10] And that was what year?

**Sandy** [01:37:12] So that would have been [19]96, maybe. [19]96, I think.

**Debbie** [01:37:19] Okay. We have a lot to talk about. I'm going to stop recording. Don't hang up.

[INTERRUPTION]

**Debbie** [00:00:00] Sandy, we're picking up now. Today is February 26<sup>th</sup>, 2024. We're on Zoom. Sandy is in Charles -- well, Sandy, what town do you live in?

**Sandy** [00:00:12] I live in Charleston, South Carolina now.

**Debbie** [00:00:14] Oh, it is Charleston, your town.

**Sandy** [00:00:17] Oh, it's Mount Pleasant. Mount Pleasant, but no one will know where that is.  
[laughs]

**Debbie** [00:00:22] Well, she's in Mount Pleasant, South Carolina, which is just outside of Charleston. Hannah Goldman is on zoom, and Debbie Goldman is conducting the interview and is also on zoom. Sandy, you talked about why CWA responded when US Airways -- I think it was first reservation agents, maybe gate agents -- reached out to CWA.

**Sandy** [00:00:45] Yes.

**Debbie** [00:00:46] And why, as customer service, it made some sense. The profession, rather [than] the industry, was one that was common with what CWA represented. [CWA was] one of the only unions that represented call center workers. And Rick Braswell of the national office coordinated the US Airways campaign. How did that lead into then organizing gate agents and reservation agents at American [Airlines]? Tell us that story. It's [an] interesting and long story.

**Sandy** [00:01:29] Well, even though we at US Airways had originally been contacted by the reservations agents included in the -- I'm going to talk a little bit about the Railway Labor Act and the National Mediation Board. Because there would be a lot of dates in here, and I'll just say generally, we had campaigns from 1995 until 2015 when we finally won at Envoy. So we had, in terms of passenger service agents, campaigns with US Airways, [for] which we had to have three elections. There was a lot of legal stuff in there. American Airlines, we had three elections. American Eagle,

which [is] now flying as Envoy, we had two elections. And Piedmont -- passenger service agents and ramp -- it was kind of a different category, but we had two elections. And then once the flight attendants, Association of Flight Attendants, merged with CWA -- and I think that was around 2004 -- we had numerous elections, but the big ones were two Delta elections -- it was their second, our first one with them -- and then we had a second one when Northwest Airlines merged with Delta. We lost that and are still working on Delta. And a big one when Continental and United merged. United was represented by AFA-CWA and Continental by the Machinists. We won that one. That was very large. So we worked on a lot of airline campaigns. The big difference is that it's included under the Railway Labor Act. The governing body is the National Mediation Board. It's a three person body. In terms of who gets to appoint them -- it would be two people that are designated by whatever party is in charge of the White House and one in the other party. So that changed during the many years from [19]94, [19]95, when we started US Airways, through now. I'm just going to say one more thing about the law. I'll say there's several big differences, but under the Railway Labor Act, units have to be nationwide. You can't do one reservations office in Dallas by itself or one airport, like DFW Airport, by itself. There are no single location units, unless it's a flight attendant unit and they only have one base or something like that and it's sort of a single unit, but otherwise they're nationwide units that you have to organize. Until 2010, after president Obama appointed Linda Puchala to the National Mediation Board -- she's the former flight attendant -- you had to win by a majority of those who were eligible to vote. So the eligibility list was everything, because if a person didn't vote, they were considered a no vote.

And then the other thing is, when you get the eligibility list -- unlike under the NLRA [where] you get a list of people and their home addresses, so you can contact them personally, or at least do mailers, or whatever. Again, these are nationwide units which include the territories -- Guam, Virgin Islands, Puerto Rico, those kind of places. No addresses. You get their job title and the location that they either work at or they last worked at before they were furloughed -- which is another big thing under the Railway Labor Act. Whatever the company furlough policy is, if they're still furloughed and have recall rights, they're on the eligibility list. If somebody has been furloughed under American Airlines, it was a ten year recall. So even people who have been gone that long -- unless they have gone to work for another airline which would have excluded them -- we would have had to figure out if they'd gone to work for another airline. Something like that. And again, they were considered "no" votes if they just didn't vote or they hadn't kept up with the company with their address. Any of those things. So that sets the stage for a learning curve for us.

Under the Railway Labor Act, there were also no unfair labor practice charges. You can't halt a campaign because of an unfair labor practice charge. At the end, if you lose, you can challenge the election. So you just document along the way all the atrocious things that the company does. Then, if you choose, you challenge the election. So in US Airways, we challenged the first election that we lost. We won that challenge. We had a second election. We won the second election. The company kept litigating while we were bargaining. Ultimately, the courts overturned that, right in the middle of the American election.

**Debbie** [00:08:23] Overturned what?

**Sandy** [00:08:26] The decision we'd gotten from the NMB, which is that there had been interference in the first election and gave us a second election. The NMB ruled the company created a company union and said, "You don't need a union because you have this round table." Under the Railway Labor Act that's illegal. So we got a second election, while we were in bargaining, and



we'd bargained about 90% of the contract by then. This would've been in [19]98. The company continued to move it through the courts. They'd actually challenged the NMB, not us. So the lawsuit was against the National Mediation Board for their decision to give us a second election. When the court came down with the decision, we could have either taken it on to the Supreme Court, which would have taken years, or -- we felt like our unit was so strong -- we'd just go forward with the third election, which we did, and we won by a very high percent. Leading up to that third election, US Airways implemented 90% of the contract that we bargained to try to dissuade the agents from voting for the union. They gave them everything that we had bargained at the table, except we were right at the end of wages and stuff. So we got back to the bargaining table quickly and got that.

So on American -- again, we got a petition from several hundred agents who said, "Come work with us." We got the contacts initially through the airports, because they oftentimes work side-by-side with the US Airways people. As organizers would be walking through the airports talking to people, we'd stop and talk to agents of many different airlines. The American agents had been, in the past, working with the Teamsters. Internally, the Teamsters decided they didn't want to move forward with a big, national, expensive campaign like that. So my initial contact was the guy who presented this petition and had been fired for his union organizing with the Teamsters and was continuing as an organizer with a Teamster local. But the local Teamsters had basically said, "Go ahead and take it to CWA." The database and everything. We were out at the airports anyway talking to US Airways agents. The reservations offices are very excluded. So we started at airports and we were like, "Wow, this is going to be easy." There was so much support at the airports. It was overwhelming. I remember my first time I went around DFW airport with Mike Lovuolo who was the fired American agent. And people were running up, hugging us, saying, "Will you help us organize? Will you help us organize?" [They] thought that the campaign that Rick had run at US Airways was brilliant.

**Debbie** [00:11:47] And why were they so eager to have a union?

**Sandy** [00:11:51] There were a lot of things that were going on. There was a company in-house grievance procedure that they never won in. People tried to do it and you couldn't win. There was mandatory overtime and no rules on it. They could just say, "Because you're at gate C36 and you have a flight that's way late, that's coming in from San Antonio, you have to stay here." You might have been junior, senior. You might have worked a double shift. The Fair Labor Standards Act also doesn't apply in the airline industry. They can work you really long hours. There's a different wage and hour kind law at airports. At the airports, American had a low cost regional carrier that was called American Eagle. And so, particularly at medium to small airports, they'd just all of a sudden say, "This is an Eagle location and you can go to work for Eagle. We'll give you a job with Eagle." But you lose your wages or seniority. The wages were much lower at the low-cost carrier. Or they'd just contract it out to contractors. So people at small and medium airports were really nervous. We had bargained a thing in the US Airway contract about what happens if there are a certain number of mainline flights going into an airport they have to be paid as mainline agents. Airport people were really excited about that. So [there was] a lot of uncertainty in the airline industry, no protection. At airports, everyone that surrounded them were in the union. At American, the pilots, the flight attendants, the grounds workers were all union. They saw what the difference was between having a union and not having a union. So we started taking that campaign on.

Then we got to the reservations offices and it was a whole different story. This is another thing under the Railway Labor Act. The decisions about who was included and what unit were made years and years ago, often when small reservations offices would be at hangars of airports and people

would move back and forth pretty smoothly. By the time we started this campaign, that wasn't true. These were mega centers that were enormous. I think our one in Dallas had 1,500 to 2,000 people. I can't remember how big it was, but they were very large centers where you couldn't easily move back and forth from the airports. They had no connection with airport employees, except for like, in the case of Dallas -- I'm going to say that, because that's where I was the district organizing coordinator in that region at the time. That was my big location, DFW airport and the reservation office that was close to the airport. So we got to the reservation offices and it was a different story. They had been running a serious anti-union campaign during the Teamster drive. People were pretty turned off by that. It was very hard to talk to people, unlike at the airports. So we built organizing committees, developed a national leadership structure and started signing cards. The cards are good for, I think, a year under the Railway Labor Act. You can petition with 35%. We wouldn't have petitioned with 35%. But we got to what we thought -- and again, the unit is tricky, who all's included and who's not -- but got to the point where we had well over 50%. [We] went to the first election. The unit was padded. The company gave a list that was ridiculous, that included a lot of people who had been furloughed for years, from stations and reservations offices that had closed down. Some of the people had gone to work for American Eagle and we had to prove that. All of that weight is on you. You get the eligibility list. Then during the election period, you have the right to challenge the eligibility list, and they start taking people off. They do mail ballot elections, because in this case, the unit was spread out from San Juan to Seattle. So it was large and overwhelming. It was a real opportunity, in terms of the CWA organizing program, to involve a lot of members in organizing. There was no way -- our national organizing staff was[able to handle this along] -- there were one or two district organizing coordinators in each district and one at the national union. That was pretty much the staff that we had at the time.

**Debbie** [00:18:07] So you're talking about ten to fifteen people?

**Sandy** [00:18:10] Yeah. I'm forgetting the number of locations that American had, but it was over 100 locations. I mean, the big ones -- two thirds of them, I'd say -- were in a certain number of states at least. We had big states. And, of course, the big hubs for airports were Chicago, Dallas, Miami. Chicago, Dallas, Los Angeles and New York were the big ones. Then there were, at that time, I think, five big res offices -- reservations offices -- and then some smaller ones. The three big ones were in North Carolina, Texas, and Arizona and smaller ones in Cincinnati and Hartford.

**Debbie** [00:19:14] So how did the organizing program do this with 100 locations?

**Sandy** [00:19:22] We involved locals and local organizers. Some locals would be in certain geographic areas and just have a small airport. We took people almost permanently off the job in Tucson, Arizona, Raleigh, North Carolina, and Dallas to help run the campaigns in those areas. We definitely had strong internal leadership in the American group. But in some places, we couldn't find anybody, initially, or you might have one or two people. It's very hard when the company starts running an anti-union campaign, even if it's a location with only twenty agents in a small airport if you only have one or two internal leaders. It's hard to be the one person who stands out as the leader of that location. So with the internal organizing committee of American agents, we had regular -- there were no Zoom calls at the time, but we had regular national conference calls. We tried to do regional, in-person meetings because they could fly for free. We tried to have regional meetings to connect people physically with each other, like [an] organizing campaign would. We used the basics of CWA's organizing model -- assessing everybody, finding internal leadership, trying to build a one to ten structure. I would say we got to that at some of the airports. We never got close to that in the

reservation offices. It was a brutal campaign in the reservation offices. They'd have TV monitors all over the place with full-time anti-union videos going on all the time. They'd let people off the phone, which everybody -- I mean, we know this from call center workers. If you said, "Do you want to go be [at] an execution?" People would volunteer to get off the phone. And in this case, it was, "Do you want to go hear about the union?" We encouraged our committee people to go so they could refute things, but everybody wanted off the phone. Those kind of things were really nonstop. It was a weird thing, though. Inside the reservation offices, they had vendor tables. If you were an employee, you could sell -- if you did macramé or you had supplements that you sold, health food supplements, or knockoff purses or -- it was crazy, some of the things that people had there -- you did tie dye, you could set up a table and run it in the middle of -- the one I had in Dallas had a huge atrium in the middle of it [in which] employees could set up tables. So employees on the committee would get tables and do union tables inside the res[ervations] offices. But people were scared. They were monitored. It was an atrium with a second floor that had a balcony on it. They [managers] would be taking pictures and monitoring who came to the table and that kind of thing and the agents knew it.

**Debbie** [00:22:44] Were activists fired or disciplined?

**Sandy** [00:22:48] Yes. Yeah. And again, you have to take those to court. There's no internal process for that. So that's why when Mike Lovuolo had been fired with the Teamsters. The Teamsters chose not to go through a court proceeding because there was no other proceeding that you could go through. And it's interesting. In later years, while I was the organizing director, people had the idea that if we could get to court and not have to go through the National Labor Relations Act and the board, it'd be better because you could go through discovery and do a lot of things that you can't do under the current process that you have to use first -- before you go to court -- in the NLRA. And I said, "Oh, no. We've done that, under the Railway Labor Act. And it's years and it's not a good process either."

**Debbie** [00:23:45] What year are we talking about? And how big was the unit? And how many lost-time organizers do you think you had?

**Sandy** [00:23:55] Oh. I'm not going to know the last one, Debbie, but I want to say -- the first election was in 1997. It was 17,000 to 18,000 people. We didn't have enough lost-time organizers. It certainly wasn't nearly big enough for the -- I had, well, all of District 6, but just DFW Airport and the res office together were probably almost 3,000 people. I had a couple of lost-time organizers working with me on it and Mike Lovuolo was there. That's where he was located. So we kind of had the headquarters of that campaign in Dallas. That's where we kept the database. Again, we didn't have these national databases that could automatically sync up. So we had to sync the data every night when people would get their data in to try to have one database. So it was more complicated than it was in our last election for American. So we lost that election. I want to say -- I'm trying to remember -- it was pretty big. Maybe we got 40 percent, 42 percent of what ended up being eligible voters. And so we lost that.

**Debbie** [00:25:43] Can I ask another question? Lost time organizers -- did they come out of the traditional telephone units? And within CWA, was it controversial to be spending resources on organizing in the airlines? In American? You'd already done US Airways, I guess.

**Sandy** [00:26:06] Some of the lost time people did come out of the traditional phone company. In Dallas, I had a woman who was at one of our call centers with Southwestern Bell. Her daughter worked at the reservation office at American. And one of my favorite literature pieces ever was a comparison between Anne McQueary and Joanna, her daughter, [of] what their work life was like, and them talking about it. Anne, the mother, being so excited when she heard that CWA was organizing there and volunteered. [She] wanted to help. It was her first organizing campaign. At that point in reservations, your pay was based on -- it was called "PER" -- Performance Evaluation Review, it was based on how many tickets you sold, if the people actually got on the flight of the ticket that you sold, how much time you spent on the call selling the ticket, it was a really complicated formula. People couldn't figure it out themselves about whether or not they got paid the right amount or not. That was at the reservation office. So it was a natural fit with the telephone company call center people to work on that with us. The airports were a little bit different. We did finally have the contract at US Airways, and so we could get them off some. It wasn't as lenient of a leave policy as we had at Southwestern Bell and some of the other Regional Bell Operating Companies, but it was -- in terms of being able to work on the big airports -- we could have a lot of people working on the small ones, because if you took a day here or there, it was fine in most places under our contracts with the phone companies. But if you took too much time, it was a problem. And we either had to get people off like, for permanent leaves, for six months at a time or something like that. I couldn't really take every one of the reservations offices. We had at least one, sometimes two people working almost full-time on them. A lot of the district organizing staff did the airports, and just ran those, worked almost full-time on that. Susan Baxter-Fleming who was the District Organizing Coordinator in District 4 and had the Chicago airport and the reservations office in Cincinnati, was full-time on AA [American Airlines] during the intense periods and coordinated other pieces.

**Debbie** [00:28:59] And what was a gender and racial breakdown of the units?

**Sandy** [00:29:06] The reservations offices were heavily female and, depending on where you were, more heavily people of color. It changed over the period of time that we worked with them. It got more and more people of color as they lowered the pay and started having people work from home. There was a certain period of time where they only hired people to work at home, and it was a much [more] substandard pay than the people who had been in the offices. It became more people of color that worked there. The airports -- it really depended on where you were. If you were in Miami or you were in Chicago -- but it had more males. I'd say it's probably 50/50 at the airport, male and female.

**Debbie** [00:30:12] Okay. So I think we were at -- CWA lost the first election.

**Sandy** [00:30:18] We lost the first election. The company had set up a company union in addition to hundreds of other violations. We filed, similar to what we filed at US Airways when we won with the National Mediation Board. The National Mediation Board took a while to decide. I mean, a long time. In hindsight, it looked like they were waiting for the court to rule on the case against the National Mediation Board. When we lost that lawsuit in court on US Airways, the NMB ruled against our charges at American right away. So we didn't get a second election at American.

**Debbie** [00:30:59] And this was under the George Bush NMB?

**Sandy** [00:31:04] Yeah. [19]98?

Sandy Rusher – February 22 and 26, 2024

**Sandy** [00:31:10] I think so. Obama came in 2009. So I think [19]98 we were still -- the US president was George Bush.

**Sandy** [00:31:22] Okay.

**Debbie** [00:31:27] Wait a minute, wait a minute.

**Sandy** [00:31:28] No. Would that have been [Bill] Clinton?

**Debbie** [00:31:31] It was Clinton. It was Clinton.

**Sandy** [00:31:32] Yeah.

**Debbie** [00:31:33] Okay. It was a Democratic NMB.

**Sandy** [00:31:36] I think. They don't ever tell you why they ruled the way they did. It's not like they sit down and say, "We had to rule against you because--" But they didn't want to lose credibility, I'm sure, with Congress if they had ruled again on similar -- not the same, not the exact same facts, but similar facts in our favor after they'd lost in court. Then we hadn't challenged that US Airways decision because we decided not to take it to the Supreme Court. So that decision stood, and then they had to decide on us. Anyway, we tried to regroup. In the interim, we did an American Eagle election. American Eagle was their regional carrier. And again, while we had been talking to American agents, we talked to a lot of Eagle agents. At DFW airport, there's two wings, two terminals that are just American and one terminal that's just American Eagle that are attached. The thing about American Eagle is they didn't have reservation offices. That's what really clinched us. I mean, that's what really killed us, the first election at American Airlines, our lack of support in reservations. And the difficulty, I think, we really came to recognize -- if you have an all out anti-union campaign -- and even though [in] the broad unit we had well over 50% signed up, in the reservations offices -- I think my reservation offices got to the highest of any, and it was at 35%. It's very hard to hold on to minority support in that kind of intense anti-union effort.

**Debbie** [00:33:29] Minority -- you mean minority by numbers, or by--?

**Sandy** [00:33:32] Yes, yes.

**Debbie** [00:33:34] Not racial.

**Sandy** [00:33:35] Yes. The 35% that we had. We had really brave, strong people that would stand outside and handbill, that would staff the tables inside, that used the opportunities to -- it's hard to talk to people in call centers. People have their headsets on. They're monitored all the time. They hear everything you say, even if you don't have anybody on the line. And you could talk about other stuff. People were scared to talk about it, except for those times in the coming or going. The shifts are all day long. They're 24 hours. They had start times every 30 minutes. You didn't have a desk, so you never knew who you're going to be sitting next to. You came in and sat in whatever department you were in, whether it was domestic sales, international sales around the world, whatever, you sat in your department. But you didn't sit in any particular place next to the same people every day. So the way that they had structured the workplace was very isolating and hard to talk [in]. So we had

low support in all the res offices. We had such overwhelming support at the airports that we got well over 50% overall, but didn't make it in the first election. At Eagle, they had either passenger service agents who did the ticketing and gate work, or people below the wing who did the baggage and the ramp work. We initially tried to file for just the above the wing work because they have, under the Railway Labor Act, what they call a preponderance test. If people are cross-utilized, they'll do this preponderance testing where they see, where do you spend most of your time? It's a really ridiculous thing. Again, the units are so outdated under the Railway Labor Act that it messed us up a couple of times with American Eagle. We tried just doing the hubs where people only did the above the wing work inside the airports and the company made a big deal out of it and said, "This shows why you shouldn't vote for CWA because [of] their lack of experience under the Railway Labor Act. They don't understand that you can't file for an above the wing only unit." And this will only become important maybe later in the story, if I can get through it. So we refiled for everybody, including a fleet and passenger service group. Turnover was so high. Again, because there was all this controversy about who was in the unit, [it] took a long time to get to the election. Turnover was so high at American Eagle we couldn't maintain. So we lost that election at American Eagle. We were regrouping at American.

And there were rumors of American buying TWA, the airline. Some people will remember that. It was a really great airline. The passenger service agents there were union. They were in the Machinist union. We had this 17,000 people unit at American. 4,000 at TWA. We started looking at it. There were 4,000 there. With 21,000 people, and the support of 4,000 more union people who had had a union, we could win even if we maintained the support we had at the res offices. But we couldn't approach those workers during the time that the company was talking about merging because they were represented by another union. We did try to approach the other union, and, without getting too negative about it, they were not interested in doing anything jointly with us. When the final merger actually happened in January of 2001, they decided to give up representation rights and not join in. So when they gave up representation rights, we had the right to approach the TWA agents. The company had given all kinds of commitments to TWA employees and the unions that represented them about how they wanted to keep St. Louis as a hub. They would keep the reservation offices there. They weren't going to lay off anybody. All that kind of thing.

That was January 2001, and we were able to start reaching out and working with the former TWA agents, where we found very strong support and great leaders. Then there was 9/11. As the dust settled after 9/11, the hatchet started happening. Airlines started closing and there was downsizing every place. People were furloughed. Reservations offices were closed. The company did decide that TWA people were expendable first and they got rid of TWA people. And to make the American agents happy and think they didn't need a union for protection, they said that they would staple the former TWA agents to the bottom of the seniority list. In airlines seniority is everything. Do you get laid off? What shift do you can you bid on? What departments can you bid on? A lot of people were furloughed. We recognized, as that happened over the following year to year and a half after 9/11, it was very clear we couldn't have another election because the majority of the unit was furloughed. You really had no way of contacting them or talking to them or seeing them. People were really demoralized. If they weren't furloughed, they gave more stations over to American Eagle to lower the cost. They contracted out more stations. There became a whole industry of contractors who did station work, both below the wing and above the wing. The people who went to work for another airline were going to be not eligible, but everybody else would still be eligible to vote.

Sandy Rusher – February 22 and 26, 2024

So we met with the leaders in person and had conference calls about what to do next. They said, "We need a voice now more than [ever]. We've got to be a force now more than ever because we've got to have a voice in what's happening with all these closures." So we formed what was called the Association of Passenger Service Agents, formed a local, local 6001. It was headquartered in Dallas. They had worked with some of the Texas State Employees Union members and had been really interested in what they were doing, of having a union with no hope of immediate collective bargaining, and not even signing cards and trying to get to an election. They said, "What about something like this?" The leadership decided that they thought that was a good idea and we'd try it. We'd form these organizing committees and would do same kind of activist work. We could work on – for example, there has to be reauthorizations of the FAA every so often that Congress has to do. We could try to get some things in that. The flight attendants had gotten some language on unruly customers and what to do with unruly customers. So we got passenger service agents included in that language on airport/airplane rage, so that you could call in a federal officer, instead of having to leave it to the whim of the station manager about whether or not a passenger was unruly enough to tell them, "You can't get on the plane and you have to leave." It was a federal mandate.

**Debbie** [00:42:42] Sandy, this is fascinating. I'm just looking at time.

**Sandy** [00:42:47] Okay.

**Debbie** [00:42:48] Because we have a lot to do in terms of the airlines. Let's try and not have every detail, even though it's fascinating. Okay, so we've now got this passenger service organization --

**Sandy** [00:43:05] So we have the passenger service association and we worked with that for a number of years. Again, people had ten-year recall rights. We were kind of waiting for the ten-year period when people wouldn't have recall rights. And what happened was, there were a lot of rumors that American was going to go bankrupt. All the other major legacy carriers had declared bankruptcy and had gotten rid of a lot of their debt, and American was trying not to. But in the end, in 2011, they declared bankruptcy. Passenger service agents said, "We have to have a stronger voice in this process. Please let us try to get to an election again because we know this is going to be terrible." So we did. We put out cards again, filed for an election quickly. The bankruptcy was like November of 2011. We filed very quickly and with just over 35% that you could do in the industry, so that we could try to get some claim to this. [We] did a bunch of stuff to get a voice in bankruptcy court, which I won't go into because it's a detail we don't need to know. In 2010 the NMB changed the rule about the 50% plus one of eligible voters having to vote and if you didn't vote, you were a no vote. In 2010, that changed after Obama's appointment of Linda Puchala. The rules changed to election rules [similar to ] almost every other type of election, so you could win an election with the majority of those who actually vote.

**Debbie** [00:45:06] And that had been a big focus of CWA, to get that changed?

**Sandy** [00:45:10] We worked heavily on that, and that's one of the things that the Association of Passenger Service Agents worked on. Congress was upset about that rule change and changed the law in like, February, I guess, of 2012 -- you had to have a 50% showing of interest, not a 35% showing of interest.

**Debbie** [00:45:38] But the base remained those who voted, not --

**Sandy** [00:45:43] Of those who voted, yes. So the company held up that election for several years by first taking us to court. We finally won at the appellate level. Then they said we had to meet the standard, the new standard of a 50% showing. They were trying to apply they rule retroactively. Well, we knew, with what we had filed a year before, we weren't going to meet the standard because you can't add cards as you go along. You give the cards in. The company is supposed to submit a list. They never submitted a list. So they held it up again saying we had to meet the 50% showing. It was ruled in court that they can't retroactively apply that to a filing that we made before the law was changed. The NMB scheduled this election, I think, four times. The company kept getting injunctions and that sort of thing. Finally the NMB said, "You have to turn over the list to us." The company refused to turn over the eligibility list. Finally we said, "We'll bring you one." The [National Mediation] Board was going to take our list if the company wouldn't turn over the list. So the company reluctantly turned over the list to try to again pad the list. During that whole time they were in bankruptcy. It gave them another reason to start shutting down more airports. They knew our strength was in the airports. They told people, "You're never going to get a job back." Even though, technically, those people should have been eligible to vote under recall, they said, "We won't reopen this location, ever so you have the option of taking an early buy out" which made them ineligible to vote. And so by the time we got to the election, we had lost -- I think we filed with what we thought was about 10,000 eligible people, and there were 7,700 in the unit because they got rid of that many people off the eligibility list. And we lost by 150 votes in that election.

**Debbie** [00:47:55] Oh my goodness.

**Sandy** [00:47:55] So that would have been 2013. Within a month, there were rumors that they were trying to merge with US Airways where we represented the agents. What I didn't mention is that in those years, US Airways had bought America West, another airline. America West passenger service agents had been represented by the Teamsters. We decided rather than to fight in an election with the Teamsters over who would represent the agents, that we would do joint representation. The Teamsters got everything west of the Mississippi and we got everything east of the Mississippi. It was tough because we both had to give up agents that had been in our union for a while and really fought to be in it. But the agents decided that was the best thing. So we were doing joint bargaining and joint representation with the Teamsters. So, the merger was discussed. It was, at first, turned down. Ultimately, the Justice Department did decide, again without going into minute detail, it was decided that they could merge. They merged --

**Debbie** [00:49:12] And do I recall that the CWA supported the merger?

**Sandy** [00:49:17] We did support the merger. We thought it would be the best thing for the -- US Airways was having a hard time, being a fourth legacy carrier. Southwest wasn't considered a legacy carrier. So you had Delta, United, and American and US Airways was considerably smaller and more concentrated in certain areas. The merger would have made American stronger, protected our US Airways agents and given the American agents a better chance of finally having formal representation. So we had to have another election. This time the union group, US Airways, was smaller than the non-union group, American, but they'd been working together for a long time. We'd had the US Airways agents involved in the American campaign for a very long time, and so it wasn't seen as antagonistic. They were excited to be merging. They knew each other. With great difficulty, we again agreed to do joint representation with the Teamsters. I won't go into that messy stuff.

**Debbie** [00:50:26] Why not?



**Sandy** [00:50:30] Well, did you want me -- I thought you didn't want me to go into too much detail.

**Debbie** [00:50:34] Well, summarize the messy stuff of negotiating with the Teamsters over joint representation.

**Sandy** [00:50:43] I think they represented, I'm trying to remember what the size of the unit would have been. At US Airways, they probably had 1,200 people and we had 4,000 or something like that. So we represented the majority of the US Airway group even though there was evenness on the bargaining committee. We had the same number of people in the bargaining committee and that kind of thing. Then we had had this campaign with Americans since 1996 and had just barely lost an election. American was the bigger group, about 8,000 people. We just thought that that wasn't right. We had really strong activists who had been with us the whole time that were on the west coast. And all the way up to [making] the decision that if we won the election they were going to be part of the Teamsters was very hard. We had some gut-wrenching conversations, and people decided the important thing was that everybody had a union, [that] US Airways [would] keep their union and American [would] get one finally, whoever represented them. So we decided to do it but CWA would run the campaign. CWA would do what we'd been doing. The Teamsters would be the organizers in the airports and reservation offices that were west of the Mississippi. We had a tough transition of our committees over to that, but anyway, that's what we did. We had that election in 2014. And we won overwhelmingly. I think it was 86%. There were about 14,000-15,000 people in the unit. We had won at Piedmont, US Airways' regional carrier, several years before that. Then, about a year after that, we ended up winning at American Eagle, which was called Envoy by [the] time we finally won representation with those units. So in terms of our passenger service units, we now have American, Piedmont, and Envoy.

**Debbie** [00:53:39] Sandy, this is an amazing story. Just to clarify. After winning, the merged American-US Airways west of the Mississippi is represented by Teamsters?

**Sandy** [00:53:56] It is.

**Debbie** [00:53:57] Okay.

**Sandy** [00:53:57] And east of the Mississippi is represented by us. We did redo the representation and negotiation agreement with the Teamsters because our group east of the Mississippi was going to be so much larger that we have proportional representation now. So how many people you elect on the bargaining committee is proportionate to how many each union has. Then we decided, on our part, that reservations and airports would be guaranteed seats on the bargaining committee because the issues are very, very different. I think, probably one of the key things to say during that time is, in terms of organizing and thinking about call center workers, particularly, and we had been bargaining in other industries. Companies in other industries where we represented call center workers had come and talked about doing home-based customer service work. We had been reluctant to enter into that. I think, probably after 2001, when the company started cutting and closing reservations offices, they still needed reservation agents when the industry started coming back. So they started putting -- all new reservations hires were home-based, initially had to be within a fifteen mile vicinity of a brick-and-mortar reservation [office]. And pretty soon that expanded to like 75 miles. And pretty soon, they could have done it anywhere if they wanted to. They still wanted people to be able to come in and do trainings and that sort of thing, but [only] occasionally. So the home-based pro-

gram [had] much lower pay, different benefits, different sick and vacation benefits. You had to pay for your own equipment. You had to have a designated area in your house, which they'd come and look at. It was not the job that had been at the centers. The US Airways agents saw what was happening and they preemptively bargained for home-based work. US Airways never set up home-based work, but we had very good contract language about what would happen, in terms of same pay, same benefits, how it would decide who went home. The American agents were really interested in that. Even reservations agents perked up their ears. And if we could contact them, the more home-based agents there were, they knew they were getting the shaft, in terms of how they were being treated. When we were able to contact them, which was very hard to do. We started doing much more home visiting than we had done in the past. We started doing little coffees and that kind of stuff at people's houses because they oftentimes knew the other people that worked around them. To get off the job, people had to swap with each other. You could say, "Debbie, will you take my morning shift if I take your evening shift?" So there [was] a whole list of people that other people knew because they were swapping buddies. So we worked through those kind of lists. But it was very hard to know, even what the size of the group was. So [in] the last two organizing campaigns, we did really try to figure out how to organize and keep solidarity and a sense of community among people who are working from their homes and hardly ever come into a reservation office except to do training.

**Debbie** [00:58:14] This is now very important today. So what did you learn? What would you share with people today who have units that work at home, not just in airlines but in other sectors like telecom now?

**Sandy** [00:58:29] I think that you just have to think of all the ways that they're already connected with each other. It's something that you learn is a fundamental of organizing. You can't go into a workplace and know the different ways people are separated or connected with each other, what the informal and formal kind of social networks are, what and why do people talk to each other. You have to really learn that from the workers in the organizing process. For flight attendants, it's definitely swapping. Dropping and swapping flights is a major way people connect with each other and that was true for home-based agents. And to do mobilization kind of things, we did -- oh, on Facebook, we'd do pick badges so they could wear -- because we'd have "Wear your button today," "Wear your pin." When we were voting, we had one color of pin if they hadn't voted yet, and then they'd swap it out to show that they had voted -- a red pin or a green pin. They would do that on the pick badge, Facebook groups -- again, swap groups, and people who lived in the same communities. They loved [that] we were a vehicle to bring people together. We'd be like, "Did you know that there is another res agent that lives just down the block from you?" And so it was really a way -- once we could finally get some phone numbers and some addresses and actually connect people -- that people could see each other and know each other, which was an advantage to them, because you're more likely to swap if Debbie calls and says, "My daughter's sick today and I have to take her to the doctor." You're more likely to swap if you know her and you're kind of friendly with her than if she contacts you out of the blue. So I think really digging deep, and understanding what those networks were, was important. People who had worked at the reservations office and had gone home base, or if their whole department had been made to go home base and they either had the option of staying in that department or moving to a different kind of reservations -- all of those were ways that people were connected with each other that we had to dig into.

**Debbie** [01:00:58] Okay, so now we're at 2014 and CWA has won representation. Before we get into the bargaining, which I want you to talk about, particularly in terms of the home based, I want

Sandy Rusher – February 22 and 26, 2024

to ask a couple questions about organizing. First of all, as an organizer, Sandy, who coordinated this more than ten-year campaign to represent these folks who lost -- you said in the beginning -- multiple elections, how does it feel and how do you keep going personally?

**Sandy** [01:01:46] To have lost the elections? And American was 18 years. You want me to start with that?

**Debbie** [01:01:51] You work really hard, you lose an election, right? How's it feel? How do you pick yourself up? How do you help other people pick themselves up?

**Sandy** [01:02:03] I remember the day that we got the decision from the NMB that they wouldn't rerun the election in [19]98 because, by that time we'd figured out some of the stuff that we'd done wrong. I was pretty sure we could win a re-run election if we got one. And then we weren't going to get it. I was literally coming home. We'd had a strategy meeting in Raleigh-Durham, North Carolina -- and I was getting on the plane to fly home -- where we were like, "Okay, this second election, this redo election, here's the strategy." I had to fly into DFW airport and see all these people who, over the years, have become very good friends -- but even three years with them -- and tell them we weren't going to get another election. It was really heartbreaking. We had really worked to build ourselves up to the second election and do what they did at US Airways. The thing is, I had to keep saying, "We'll keep at it." And so whether it's conference calls or whatever, I had to be very upbeat and positive and make myself believe that we'd have another shot at it. We figured out what the weak points of the campaign had been. But by the time we had the last election, the American agents had gone through so much and had been with us for so long. When they pivoted and started building a membership organization in 2003 it was something they had never considered-- "You're going to pay dues to an organization that doesn't have collective bargaining," particularly in an industry where there was so much collective bargaining all around you, a really crazy, kooky idea. But they were up for it. People were trained in using the in-house grievance procedure really well. We were winning 90% of our grievances. People were actually very excited about what they were doing on the job, but they definitely knew it was not collective bargaining. So we had so many joyous occasions and celebrated the work that we were doing. Out of those years, there were only a couple of years where I didn't have monthly conference calls with the national committee and organizers. And even during those years where it was a little bit slower, it was probably every two months. So we never stopped organizing. What inspired me and the other organizers is that over the 18 years there were some of the same determined leaders that had been there from the first and constantly new activists coming forward, developing, giving new life and hope to the effort. I don't do anything that I don't think there's some hope that the workers will prevail, or that what we're doing just by organizing is holding at bay -- whether it was through bankruptcy, or after 9/11, or all of those times where it could have been a total bloodbath. I think our organizing really kept the company more in line than they would have been. We worked under the motto 'one day longer' that we would hold together for one day longer than the company's opposition. And I will say, the last thing -- besides the merger and having the US Airways agents included in the numbers and involved in the organizing -- the management that took over the new American was the old US Airway management who had come from the old America West. It was like the little fish eating the big fish. They had a different attitude about -- I mean, American, even though all their other union groups were organized, they acted like it would be the death of them if the passenger service agents were in the union. That was not the mentality of the new American leadership that came over from US Airways. The labor relations had been dealing with us and they'd been dealing with us at the bargaining

Sandy Rusher – February 22 and 26, 2024

table, the managers over customer services. So there was a totally different feeling at the airline after the US Airway management took over the management of American Airlines.

**Debbie** [01:06:54] Did any of that have to do with the fact that CWA had actively used its political leverage to support the merger?

**Sandy** [01:07:06] I believe so. I mean, none of that is ever said. Our support for it certainly wasn't contingent on anything, except that we thought it would be the best thing for the people that we represented at US Airways so that it didn't go into another bankruptcy. We had been through a bankruptcy with them and they had been working under a bankruptcy contract for too many years. The other difference under the Railway Labor Act is contracts never expire. They just become amendable. So you can work under the same contract for many, many years and the ability to strike is almost non-existent. So I think that it did, but they'd dealt with the unions and they'd dealt with us and it wasn't as big of a deal to them.

**Debbie** [01:08:03] Back to how you keep going in a campaign that is national, ten years -- who did you turn to for support?

**Sandy** [01:08:15] Well, the other person that helped lead American and then American Eagle and Envoy was Susan Baxter-Fleming. She was the district organizing coordinator in District 4, which is kind of the Midwest area of CWA. I had her and Mike Lovuollo, who's now a CWA staff rep, but he stuck with that campaign the whole time. And other people worked on and off on it. Larry Cohen, the organizing director and then later the executive vice-president and then later the president of CWA, who was in all those positions while we were doing these campaigns, was relentlessly supportive and a cheerleader for the campaign. We had times when we were doing the Association of Passenger Service Agents. I was probably the only district organizing coordinator spending time on it. I'd go to other districts, especially the hubs where the Association was the largest. We did grievance trainings and that kind of stuff. So, it wasn't like there was a ton of CWA time and money spent on it but there was always resources. That whole time there were resources going into it.

**Debbie** [01:10:02] There's a lot to cover, so I'm going to try and move us through quickly. Your stories and the level of detail in your memory is unbelievable. I know that it was a long time to get a contract at American. When you finally did, there were some major gains. Do you want to just summarize what some of those were?

**Sandy** [01:10:29] Oh, god, I'd have to really go back. So I continued to work with the unit in terms of signing them up as members. You're required to pay dues under the Railway Labor Act. It's not a state-by-state decision. State right-to-work doesn't make any difference. But you want people to be a member and be able to vote on the contract and vote on their bargaining team and that kind of stuff. So we turned our organizing group into signing people up as members. That was really my focus, [along with] helping with mobilization in the field. Marge Krueger, who had been a district organizing coordinator and then became the chair of the passenger service sector of the airlines in CWA, did the bargaining for that unit. We wanted to make improvements for US Airways, too. Again, they had been working under a bankruptcy contract for a lot of years. So pay was a huge change. Some things for American were bringing them up to the standards of US Airways but increasing pay in various ways (maximum and minimum pay, length of time to move through the pay scale, pay equity, etc.) were high priorities. Some things they wanted were different than what was in the US Airways contract. Job security and protections against contracting out was a major issue

Sandy Rusher – February 22 and 26, 2024

in the contract, like protecting medium to smaller stations if they still had a certain number of main-line flights they were working. But just who could be held over at the airports -- being held over and working double shifts over and over again and not knowing if you'd be able to get off and pick your kid up or if you'd need daycare or whatever, was a huge thing. And so the requirement for how much notice they have to give, who gets the assignment -- is it based on seniority or just because you're unlucky enough to be working at that gate on that terminal? If you get double pay, how much pay do you get if they can't give you the kind of notice that they get. So all of those things -- these are very, very detailed things, but made people's lives more manageable in addition to raising their their salary for --

**Debbie** [01:12:54] And my memory is, you achieve parity for the at-home [workers].

**Sandy** [01:12:59] Yes.

**Debbie** [01:13:00] That was a huge, huge pay increase.

**Sandy** [01:13:03] Yes. Yes. It was a very big thing. Both on pay and benefits. And then how you become home base, how you get to go back to the office -- strangely enough, the company -- and maybe it's because the leadership there is now US Airways and they never implemented a home based program, even though we bargained it -- there's less and less focus on that now. And people are going back into the offices.

**Debbie** [01:13:29] When you say now, do you mean now, or do you mean when you retired?

**Sandy** [01:13:35] When I retired. And I'm not absolutely sure what's going on now.

**Debbie** [01:13:38] Yeah, I wanted to check on that because I think Covid had implications for call centers.

**Sandy** [01:13:44] Yeah. Yes it did. That's true. And we did just bargain a new contract -- I don't think it's been ratified yet -- at American. So these are questions for the folks still involved.

**Debbie** [01:13:54] Let's talk a little bit about cable organizing.

**Sandy** [01:14:01] In addition to seeing jobs go to wireless at the at the phone company, what we could also see is that the Internet and broadband work was also moving to cable companies. All of us had had cable organizing way back in the [19]80s and [19]90s. I'm sure people did before that, but I didn't become national organizing staff until [19]91. But it was a lot of mom and pop cable companies. So you had the XYZ Cable Company in Springfield, Missouri, and a group of thirty people called you and wanted to have a union. We could win those elections. It was really terrible working conditions. They were all pretty tight-knit groups of people. You could win an election and then you could never get a contract -- [that] was our experience in bargaining. And then, as much as a local might really work to hold on to the group and keep them involved, you'd go through decertification after decertification effort. Then slowly, people would lose interest, and the unit would turn over, and you'd finally lose a decertification. So we had some small pockets of Internet, broadband, what were called cable companies -- but their line was carrying much more than that -- that we'd maintained, but not very much. All of a sudden --

Sandy Rusher – February 22 and 26, 2024

**Debbie** [01:15:44] Okay. Let's jump ahead. AT&T buys TCI Cable -- I believe it's in 1998. And so now AT&T is a big cable company. And CWA, as I recall, negotiated [a] certain kind of language, and decides to launch a more concerted effort to organize those units. So let's talk about that.

**Sandy** [01:16:11] This is before Southwestern Bell bought AT&T.

**Debbie** [01:16:14] Correct.

**Sandy** [01:16:16] AT&T was still long-distance but had tried to venture into other areas. So we supported the deal for them to buy TCI. We'd all had a bunch of campaigns with TCI and [they] had been horrible with John Malone as the head.

**Debbie** [01:16:32] Viciously anti-union.

**Sandy** [01:16:34] Viciously anti-union. We'd never gotten a contract with, for example, the 401K [pension]. And even if we'd get a contract, they made sure we didn't have certain things. So we were supportive [of the AT&T/TCI merger.]. They [AT&T] agreed to a neutrality language, that they would be neutral in elections. But we would have to have elections. We would not have card check elections, but there would be [a] neutral third party that would be assigned to it. There would be several arbitrators that we could arbitrate any issue around the election process or the campaigning during the election process. And the ultimate thing that was within, I think, two years after the signing of that, [was] that if we had shown that they had systematically violated the neutrality agreement, [then] we would get card check. So we all were supposed to start -- all across the country if we had these units -- organizing campaigns and move forward to elections because we wanted to use the whole process and see how it worked, in terms of the unit and the type of -- anyway, all those nitty gritty things about the election and the campaigning. It was really important to document every single part of them violating the neutrality agreement, things we might have taken for granted, that you can run into under the National Labor Relations Act, that are legal or minimal repercussions, that companies can get away with were not okay under neutrality. And we would document. So we all went out and we did training for locals all around the country. A lot of core AT&T, or the Southwestern Bell unit, or the RBOC, whatever telco local we had in the area where there was a TCI unit would be trained. People would go back and start getting contacts and would try to start campaigns. Even if they weren't perfect campaigns, we harkened back to Danny Fetonte's "Lose to win." Even if you lost, if you could document the campaign so that we got the documentation that we needed to bring this to a[n] arbitrator if we had to, to get card check. And we all did that. I was still in District 6. We probably ran ten different elections. We won about half of them -- lost the other ones, but got great documentation in all of them. We started doing bargaining on the ones that we won. We started doing at least coordinated bargaining, so there would be a person assigned in every district that would try to bargain the AT&T Broadband contracts and that we got similar things so that they didn't whipsaw us like TCI had. I'm not sure what we got to the point where we had great documentation. We wanted to take it to arbitration. And for some reason, there was a decision that you probably have to go back and interview George Kohl about to understand why. But we didn't go forward with that, to get card check. And they [AT&T] ultimately decided they didn't want to be in that business, and got rid of that subsidiary. So it was one of our failed efforts, after we'd gotten organizing rights, that we didn't organize -- we may have -- a small number of units -- I know we lost all the ones that we had in District 6 after that, after they were sold off.

Sandy Rusher – February 22 and 26, 2024

**Debbie** [01:20:46] Do you remember who bought AT&T Broadband? I'll answer my own question – Comcast [in 2000].

**Sandy** [01:20:55] That's right. That's right. We kept them for a while. We kept the units that we had. We didn't get the organizing rights agreement, kept the units that we had under Comcast. They gave some promises, but it was bullshit, to be frank, without going into detail. And we systematically lost. I had several more elections with Comcast that were horrible. We won one, I think, and lost one. I think we never got to a contract on the one we won, after it was Comcast. But we ended up losing all of them. I don't know if we have anything. I think Marge Krueger kept bargaining the contracts in District 2/13 and really held those units together in a great way. And we may still have something there.

**Debbie** [01:21:51] Pittsburgh.

**Sandy** [01:21:52] Yeah.

**Debbie** [01:21:54] Okay. Now we're going to come up to -- when did you become national organizing coordinator?

**Sandy** [01:22:03] In 2012, I became national organizing coordinator.

**Debbie** [01:22:07] And when did you retire?

**Sandy** [01:22:10] In 2019.

**Sandy** [01:22:12] Okay, so first, without detail, list some of the major campaigns of that period. And then I'll let you pick which ones to talk about in more detail.

**Sandy** [01:22:32] One of the major things, with [what] was now called AT&T Wireless -- the old Southwestern Bell Wireless, and then called Cingular, and then called AT&T Wireless after they bought AT&T -- [was] that they were competing against the nonunion Verizon Wireless and T-Mobile Wireless and that the standards were very different in those companies and that if we allowed that to happen without serious organizing campaigns in both to raise the standards either through our organizing or winning in those places that -- it would be very difficult to bargain effectively. T-Mobile had been a company that was -- what was the name before Deutsche Telekom bought them?

**Debbie** [01:23:25] I don't remember. VoiceStream or something?

**Sandy** [01:23:29] Yes VoiceStream. But when they were purchased by a German company that was unionized called Deutsche Telekom, we met with the German union, ver.di, that represented the Deutsche Telekom wireless workers and landline workers. And they said, "We think this would be good for both of us. Our company will not do this. They won't react like this. They're used to working with the union. It would be much better." I had several campaigns with VoiceStream. It was pretty awful. And so we were very much looking forward to a German company that had a good union track record and working with ver.di, the union there to look at trying to organize what would become T-Mobile. And so I think that happened in 2001 or [200]2. Do you remember?

**Debbie** [01:24:34] I'll look it up. Yeah. [2002]

**Sandy** [01:24:37] I don't remember those dates like I remember the American ones. So we started a campaign in T-Mobile that continued during the time I was the organizing director. And then, Verizon --

**Debbie** [01:24:51] Wait, I don't want you to jump.

**Sandy** [01:24:54] Okay.

**Debbie** [01:24:54] I want you to stick with T-Mobile because I think it was very unique -- the international partnership with ver.di and how that was developed, how it was sustained.

**Sandy** [01:25:10] So once we started organizing at T-Mobile, they did the predictable. The company in the United States basically told the German parent company that they needed to take a hands-off approach, that we had different standards and policies and laws in the United States, that they would abide by the law, but the law gave them leeway to do things and that they would run things like they run things in the United States. So there started to be an anti-union campaign. Ver.di would go to their parent company and say, "This isn't right, what you're doing. This is really awful." The company would be saying, "They're not running an anti-union campaign." So very early on, we started having the top levels of the German union, ver.di, come to the United States and go with us to meet with workers and handbill in front of locations. Mostly we started with the call centers. They had call center [workers], retail workers, and a small amount of technicians -- outside technicians who worked the towers and that sort of thing. Ver.di leadership would come over and see the terror in people's eyes, their not being willing to take a flyer, management coming out and taking pictures of us -- doing surveillance, telling us we didn't have the right to be there. Workers would come out and say, "You know why all the shades are drawn? The company told us we had to all shut our shades and [said,] 'No one look out.'" Those sorts of things. Things that most people would find regular and minor in the United States, the German union leadership was horrified at. They even said they have in Germany a seat on what's called the board of supervisors, which is like our board of directors here. The union has seats on the board of directors. So they [ver.di leaders] tried at several different places to go and say, "I'm actually on the board of supervisors of this company. I'd like to come in to the call center." Well, they said, "You're trespassing. It's illegal for you to be here." Security escorted them off after numerous phone calls where they were clearly calling the upper level people. This wasn't some isolated security guard who didn't know what they were doing. They were calling labor relations. Sometimes the local call center labor relations would come out and say the same thing.

So we became closer and closer to ver.di in our anger against the company. Deutsche Telekom, who had made [an] agreement, had actually met with the president of our union to say that they wouldn't run an anti-union campaign if they took over VoiceStream in the United States. So there became a closer and closer relationship [with ver.di] which really developed over time. When I left in 2019, we were still working on T-Mobile and developing that relationship. Over time it deepened in a way that we'd have a call center in one part of Germany, a Deutsche Telekom call center, who would basically adopt and agree to support a call center in the United States. The workers at each place would have regular conference calls with each other. We'd send delegations to go to each other's call centers. We'd have a delegation from Wichita, Kansas go to a location in Germany -- I went to say Düsseldorf; I can't remember which one they were paired with or Charleston SC was partnered with Berlin-- and see what the difference was -- in terms of monitoring and speed up and all of



Sandy Rusher – February 22 and 26, 2024

those things that they were upset at in the United States -- see how it was dealt with through the work councils that were run by the union in Deutsche Telekom. Then the ver.di would come to the United States, to places like Wichita, Kansas, and spend a week there and talk to workers, tell them what it was like to have a union with this company. We had 5-6 of these deep kind of call center partnerships. In many ways, the relationship really got deeper in both unions. There became more and more support in the German union, as people felt stronger that they should be able to have a union here in the United States. That sort of relationship developed to where we formed, again, a membership organization that was not moving immediately towards collective bargaining in these big call centers, but a membership organization that people could join, that was called TU, that was a union, that when they joined and they paid dues they were part of both CWA and ver.di. And so it was that kind of relationship [that] we had.

And then at the union level, CWA organizing staff and leaders -- from the president of our union with other people, the head of the research department and the legislative staff -- would meet with the heads of the telecom part of ver.di to strategize and plan and talk about how they'd both use their positions -- and they were reluctant, initially, to bring it up -- as the board of supervisors. As the company's behavior got worse and worse, that changed and ver.di began doing more and more activities and demonstrations in Germany to try to move DT to control the US T-Mobile management. We did organize a few small units of T-Mobile, a MetroPCS unit [T-Mobile's pre-paid wireless subsidiary], a group of outside technicians that we represented and had collective bargaining agreements with, but we were never able to build it to a mass level. We did get to the point of talking some about having some language of respect. I wouldn't call it a neutrality agreement -- some people called it "Neutrality Lite" -- but some form of peace. We had so many different NLRB violations against them where the NLRB ruled in our favor and we could show that not only was the company not living up to the standards in Germany, but they were breaking the labor laws in the US. We were able to get activist fired workers back pay and we got policies at T-Mobile changed, but they never significantly changed their behavior.

**Debbie** [01:32:31] Sandy. I was going to ask a general question, but I think a specific [one] will help answer this, as to why, ultimately, the campaign did not succeed in organizing. Can you tell the story of what happened when that little store of MetroPCS, which was a subsidiary of T-Mobile, looked like they were going to vote for the union. What did T-Mobile do?

**Sandy** [01:33:02] Oh! They brought in everybody.

**Debbie** [01:33:03] Tell that detail. I think that explains what workers face when their company really is opposed to it.

**Sandy** [01:33:12] The MetroPCS stores were even smaller than the T-Mobile retail stores. So I think there were ten people there.

**Debbie** [01:33:22] This is in New York City, correct?

**Sandy** [01:33:24] In New York City, yes. First they brought in the area manager and then the regional manager and ultimately the CEO of T-Mobile, John Legere, was this high profile -- thought he was a rock star, treated himself like a rock star, and made everybody do big things when he came to visit. He shows up at the store, says he was in New York and needed to do something with his phone. Everybody showed up, but they had several people -- these were more the HR [human re-

Sandy Rusher – February 22 and 26, 2024

sources] kind of people that would -- they had a basement in the retail store. One of the things they did was individually take people into the basement and grill them about their support for CWA, support for the union. How are they going to vote? Who else was going to vote? That sort of thing. Even for the very strong leadership there, it was really scary and really intimidating. The District 1 organizers really pulled out the works. They had -- I think it was -- now that I'm saying this -- was it Hakeem Jeffries? He wasn't the [House of Representatives] minority leader at the time. But the local legislators [would] come by and give them, "We're for you." All the strong union people in the New York area that you can think of came by and gave them a, "We're supporting you." And in spite of the atrocious campaign there, we won that -- a real tribute to the inside leadership and the way that they felt supported in that area by the local politicians, CWA organizers and members. Ultimately -- there were several conversations during the time that we were organizing that maybe AT&T would be able to buy T-Mobile, and they never got through the regulatory process of being able to do that. We had two hopeful times with that and we very much supported that. It would have made the world of difference to the T-Mobile workers and to our AT&T mobility workers. But that never happened. And ultimately, they let Sprint, which was the other really anti-union wireless company, buy T-Mobile.

**Debbie** [01:36:23] The Democratic DOJ turned down the AT&T-T-Mobile merger [2011], and the Trump Republican DOJ allowed the T-Mobile-Sprint merger to go through [2019/2020].

**Sandy** [01:36:34] Correct.

**Debbie** [01:36:35] Let's limit the last conversation -- you were going to say something about Verizon Wireless.

**Sandy** [01:36:42] Yeah, Verizon Wireless. District 1 had gotten a[n] agreement on neutrality with Verizon Wireless [in 2000] or around there. And I wasn't directly involved, so I shouldn't speak for it, but I will say they [Verizon] never lived up to it. They never lived up to that agreement. And so we had to think about organizing Verizon [Wireless] in a different way. We had a campaign and have an ongoing campaign in wireless, but really have not been able to break through. It shows the importance between these big and little units. You just have to have some kind of organizing rights agreement to really be able to make the kind of dent -- we could organize small groups. We did organize a Verizon wireless retail [store]. You can get small groups, but maintaining those and getting a contract without having the company say, "We're going to accept that. We're going to be in partnership with you in some way." I think the neutrality isn't just the right to organize. It's really the company, at some point, saying, "We're going to work with you." And so whether it's on organizing or bargaining or other things, it is worth trying to get to that point. Because it's not just organizing. It's whether or not you can have that group be a viable entity for the long run, I think.

**Debbie** [01:38:14] I think you've opened up where I wanted to spend the last few minutes of this fabulous conversation, and that is, What would you say you've learned over this 40-year career about what it takes to successfully have workers win their collective rights for a union and negotiate a contract?

**Sandy** [01:38:42] I'd say one of the things that I think we learn and then we relearn is that almost anywhere you can find some workers who will take risks and stand up. We're certainly finding right now more workers that are supportive of unions, that understand what unions have done, that are willing to take risks. The way the laws are set up -- if you have to go through those rules -- on a par-

ticular day at a particular time, can workers withstand the lengthy period of time it takes to get to an election and win an election under these rules? It's very hard. And so we have to find other ways to do it, or other ways to support people, and use the laws that we have. We're not forgetting those. There are some places that it can work -- in places that are more heavily union, that have other unions around. In my district that I organized in most of my career, or the state that I live in now [South Carolina], which is the least unionized state in the country -- it's not that you couldn't do that. It's that all the forces are against you, not just if the company decides to take a different stance, but the political forces are against you doing it. And we've seen it with the United Auto Workers union, with Volkswagen. [After the interview, the UAW finally won an election at Volkswagen in Chattanooga, Tennessee in 2024 after several loses and changes in the company opposition.] And it's very hard for workers if their neighbors are against them organizing and the company is against them organizing to hold up under that. But people do. People will and people do. We should support them when we can. The second, the more locals we have organizing and the more people we have in communities that are skilled at organizing, the more we can do. And so I think, in terms of our organizing program, continuing to balance having people -- through a lot of ways that we're using our resources differently, we've been able to increase the number of full-time people that are doing organizing that I never would have dreamed up when I came onto staff. So we have a large number of people doing that. But some of these things -- you got to have people in big and small communities -- CWA has a unique ability, because we represent the telephone company, to be all across the country, in most places. We don't just have one big factory in one place that if it's not there, we can't support the other things. So we have a lot more we can do, in developing our own capacity. And we continue to try to do it. But you're often pulled into the campaign that you're working on and unable to build the capacity -- it's always a struggle between those two things. And I think one of the things I learned [is] you have to pay attention to both of those -- capacity building and campaigns where the iron is hot now. And we, even with our increased capacity, don't have enough people to help support the organizing of all the people that are coming to us saying they want to have a union, much less our strategic campaigns. I think the other thing --

**Sandy** [01:42:47] And then, we need to balance working on strategic campaigns and the things that come to us that are hot. We have to continue to represent our core work. That core work is from newspapers to passenger service agents and flight attendants to telecommunications to manufacturing. We have a lot of different pieces of public sector. The core work is very broad in CWA now, and we have to be strategic about representing our core work while also looking at emerging work-- since I've left, Tom Smith, who's the new organizing director and his assistant, Tim [Dubnau] have really done a great job in the new technology fields like the gaming industry, Microsoft workers, some of that high tech work that we poked around at for a lot of years -- starting with IBM forward. I won't go into all those, but we're really digging into it now in a different way that's very exciting. And, we talked about earlier, we said we were the union for the Information Age many, many years ago. I think the Information Age is so -- it touches almost everything now. But breaking into that industry, I think, is important. And we could be doing so much more if we had more capacity. And again, Tom and Tim have to figure out a way to balance working on the capacity and working on these campaigns that are ripe and hot.

**Sandy** [01:44:35] And you have to do both of those things, I think. Yeah.

**Debbie** [01:44:40] Hannah, do you want to ask any questions? And you're on mute, if you do.

**Hannah** [01:44:51] Is there a story of a time where someone or something really surprised you? And if that's too general, then I can think of a different question.

**Sandy** [01:45:06] Yeah, probably. I mean, I'm sure there are hundreds. I don't know that I could pull out one, but those individual surprises, where people stand up and show their strength and courage, are what keep you going. I'm constantly amazed at the internal leaders we find who are willing to go through the hell they had to go through to get a union. We have a unit in – and these aren't particularly good stories, but I'm gonna tell them because -- we have a unit of Dish network, a satellite cable company that we organized. I don't know -- I organized them in maybe 2008 or [200]9. We still have them. And they faced decerts [decertifications] One thing after another, they've continued to stick with the union. Different leadership -- they fired the whole top level of our leadership. And they're still there. The other thing is, I remember one woman that was involved. It was a publishing company – Knowles Publishing -- and it was a horrible campaign. It was independently owned by Robert Knowles. He had, again, fired our top level of leadership, fired our second level of leadership -- leaders kept coming forward. They sold books, law books and other books, online and did customer service. And he had big signs the day of the election, "Who do you trust -- the union or Bob Knowles?" His daughter was the labor relations person. Right after they voted no, barely voted no, he closed them down. Said he'd rather -- because he thought there were pieces of union support, because we came close -- he'd rather not have a company than have a union company. He was good to his word. He said he'd close them if they won and instead he closed them when they lost. One of the women, and not originally in the top tier, came up to me and said, "I am so proud of what we've done here. Everyone's going to know now. Those signs that said, 'Could you trust the union or Bob Knowles?' They'll have a different opinion when they go, when they go to their next workplace." And [she] was thrilled that we stuck with it and stayed with it and that we'd had an election. And that sort of attitude -- and it did happen. I had a bunch of campaigns that we lost and people went on to the next thing and, and we won -- they were in these other cable units and we won later. And they did finally, they did finally get a union. People are so determined and not discouraged and hopeful enough to start another campaign, to be the one that called and said, "Hey, I'm now over at Sammons Cable and it's even worse over here than it was at TCI." I think, time after time -- and then our own organizing staff is amazing. How many times I had to say, "We're going to work through Thanksgiving, and we're going to work through Christmas, and we're going to work -- we have to, because ballots are out and we have an election." And you don't even have to say it. I mean, no one would think of, "I have to think about my own personal time," during that time when it's critical. So I think working with such a great group of people, all along through my career, the organizing staff -- and a lot of the other staff that supported it, I don't want to diminish that -- it's been -- I talked about at the start not wanting to be an organizer and [being] moved into it by a really great organizer, Danny. And then, I never questioned that decision. Yeah.

**Debbie** [01:49:35] Hannah, any other? Because that was a great question.

**Hannah** [01:49:43] Well, we only have a few minutes left, but -- is there any one person on the organizing staff or people in union, members that you worked with, who you just want to give a shout out and say something they did that inspired you?

**Sandy** [01:50:03] I hope I've given enough names. I mean, I think we're kind of under the -- you don't do anything by yourself. It's the numerous people that I haven't said their names -- literally thousands of people that I haven't said their names -- and some of the people that I did mention, but you can't give enough credit for what we've done to the number of people that have touched all the

Sandy Rusher – February 22 and 26, 2024

campaigns. During the time I was the organizing director, I kept saying, "Why would I have to move to Washington, DC to be the organizing director?" Well, I understood once I got there because the different departments really clicking and working together to move our organizing campaigns forward -- from research to politics to legislative to the chief of staff to the legal department.

**Debbie** [01:51:10] Communications.

**Sandy** [01:51:11] Communications. Yeah. I knew I was leaving something out. The IT people -- I think it was humming together, for the most part. We started having, I think, more meetings together on some of the campaigns, figuring out the ways the different departments could really support organizing. And they did. And then, supporting internal organizing as well, Judy Graves led that work on a national level the last few years while I was the Organizing Director. We started with me talking about how I was critical of TSEU/CWA and their lack of female organizers. Now at most levels of organizing we have really terrific women involved—Katie Romich, Erin Mahoney -- I'm leaving out a bunch of names and I'm sorry for all those people that I've left out. But no, I wouldn't name one person, except for -- I think I've talked about a lot of people who influenced me.

**Debbie** [01:52:04] You have. I have two last questions.

**Sandy** [01:52:08] Okay.

**Debbie** [01:52:09] I think the next generation is going to be listening to this. And what would you say to them?

**Sandy** [01:52:27] I'd say, "Keep trying and keep hoping. You know, we just can never give up." And on the macro level, it's discouraging that the labor movement's at the lowest point in terms of the percentage organized than when I graduated from high school. But think what it would have been if there hadn't been people on the ground, fighting for the rights that a lot of us take for granted and are slowly being deteriorated. I think it's a hopeful time. And we should keep moving forward, but come up with other new creative things as well as learning lessons from the past. A lot of people thought we were very kooky in TSEU, [for] what we were doing. But if you read history, it's not. And our first president of CWA, Joe Beirne -- he was our first president, right, Debbie?

**Debbie** [01:53:41] Yes.

**Sandy** [01:53:42] There were stories about him. That's why I'm willing to talk about this and why I do have hope -- but we didn't even have an organizing department, really, then. And he and the other people -- he actually directly did organizing. And that's been true of several of our presidents of CWA, that [they] did direct organizing. And he wore a big hat and he would go to a place where they were organizing -- this is the story and I believe it -- and pass around the hat, and people would put in money, and that would determine where they got to, in their next place they went. And so, as much as we can say, "Oh, we don't have the resources, and we don't have the people, and the laws are terrible, and how can we organize in this?" They did, and they figured out a way to do it on much fewer resources and with much less organizing capacity than we have. And so it's important we keep trying.

**Debbie** [01:54:57] Sandy, this was fabulous.