

Communications Workers of America Oral History Project

Interviewee: Nelson, Sara

Interviewer: Debbie Goldman

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**Jeff** [00:00:00] Okay. We're here this afternoon with Sara Nelson, the president of the AFA [Association of Flight Attendants-CWA]. We're joined today with Debbie Goldman and Hannah Goldman, who are also with this interview. Today's August 30th, 2024. And Sara, you're at your home in the DC area, I presume?

**Sara** [00:00:24] Yes. That's right.

**Jeff** [00:00:25] Okay.

**Debbie** [00:00:27] Washington DC or another town?

**Sara** [00:00:29] Bethesda [Maryland].

**Debbie** [00:00:30] Thank you.

**Jeff** [00:00:32] I'd like to start really at the beginning. Talk a little bit about your childhood, if you would, where you grew up, siblings, any sort of background information like that you can share with us?

**Sara** [00:00:44] Sure. Yeah. I was born in Corvallis, Oregon, 1973. I'm the oldest of three kids in my family, two younger brothers and my parents. My mom grew up in Bend, Oregon, but went to Los Angeles to start her teaching career. She met my dad there. When they first met he had just been drafted into the army and so he went off to Alaska for a couple of years. At the end of basic training, as he was getting ready to get his shots to go to Vietnam, they said, Nelson, your physical scores show that you'd be good for our Biathlon unit, so we're going to send you to Alaska instead.

**Jeff** [00:01:27] Wow.

**Sara** [00:01:28] Wow is right. Changed the whole trajectory of his life. His younger brother was sent to Vietnam in a real horrific situation. In Alaska he became a Christian Scientist. My mom grew up a Christian Scientist in Bend. Her mother had come from one of the early Christian Science families in Minnesota. They were very intellectual. My grandmother got her Masters in chemistry. One of my I think great-aunts was one of the first to serve on a judiciary in Minnesota. A lot of focus on education and higher education and also women getting an education and being self-sufficient. But my grandmother met my grandfather and moved out to Oregon. My grandfather had gone to Oregon when he was quite young, five years- old, and he had tuberculosis. The diagnosis from doctors up and down the west coast was that he was going to die at an early age. His mother had grown up a Christian Scientist, and she said I'm not going to accept that. And so they went to a Christian Science practitioner in Portland. He was healed of tuberculosis. And so my family had very, very strong experiences to ground the religion in that way in the family. And so when my father was in Alaska, he saw that there was a Christian Science practitioner. He took it up. My mom at the time had become a little bit rebellious, and maybe it was rebelling against the religion a little bit. And then he came back. She's like, great. No fun. Ha ha. But they were a match for raising a family.

**Sara** [00:03:47] My mom got a new job as a teacher position in Oregon. My dad wanted to finish up his master's degree in physical education in Oregon. And they moved up and not long after that had me. My dad had to provide for the family, so he went into the local lumber mill. The early years of my life, I remember him working in the lumber mill. I remember the smell of sawdust when he would come home and also the smell of glue because he was in a plywood plant. He actually lost part of his pinky finger in that mill. But he ultimately went into the sales office and never became a

physical education teacher because at the same time Oregon cut property taxes which cut the school budgets. So we saw a lot of cuts. My mom was a music teacher. We were lucky that her job was spared. She actually had a union contract but we did not talk about that in my house.

**Sara** [00:04:51] I think that I got a strong sense of justice from my parents and our religion was formed by a woman, Mary Baker Eddy. The description of the purpose of religion is to understand that we are made in God's image and likeness, and therefore we've got to reflect all the qualities of God. And one of the ways that she describes that is talking about male and female qualities as being equal. And our purpose in life is to try to actually express all of those qualities. So I was taught that certain qualities are not stronger or more important than others. You're not a whole being unless you're expressing all of this. I just never had the sense that women couldn't do anything that men could do. Other than the fact that my parents grew up in the 50s and if I really wanted to think about it, my brothers did the outside chores with my dad and I did all the inside chores with my mom. So, there are some discrepancies there.

**Sara** [00:06:03] But I think about it in my fourth grade class when my teacher asked all of us what we wanted to be when we grew up, and a lot of people said firefighters and all kinds of jobs that people are used to hearing from kids. And I really was like, I don't know. So I said, president of the United States. The response from the teacher was, oh, you want to be the first woman president of the United States? And I didn't really key into this until decades later when I was thinking about the experience. But at the time, in my little nine year-old brain, I said, well, I don't want to do two hard things. Okay, I'll be a teacher. (laughs) So becoming president and the first one? No! So that was really my upbringing.

**Sara** [00:07:01] My parents also taught us that money was not for things, it was for experiences. Every summer vacation, especially because my mom was a teacher and we had those summers to do a lot of things. Of course, we were signed up for all the parks and rec activities. I can remember, starting tennis at seven in the morning and then having swimming and then having softball in the afternoon then we'd play with all the kids in the neighborhood. We'd play Hot Box and we'd play Mississippi, hiding in everybody's yards, and then we'd have makeshift tents and camp out. We did a lot of camping, but we also did a lot of traveling with our family in the summers. Typically those travels would be long car trips where we would also camp at KOA campgrounds. It was a big treat that one of the nights we'd get to stay in a hotel where there was a pool, woo. So money was for experiences and traveling and meeting other people and being curious about the world. Those are the things that my parents gave me. I mean, we grew up in Corvallis, Oregon which is a university town. The big employers were the university or Hewlett Packard. All of my friends were certainly focused on education, but there's no private schools, really in Oregon other than like very small Catholic schools and just a few others here and there. But, otherwise the focus is public education. Everybody goes and everybody participates and there's not a lot to push to discover what your biases are in Oregon, especially in Corvallis, Oregon.

**Sara** [00:08:54] So I didn't really learn until much later when I was going to college in southern Illinois and had a very progressive and awesome Ed department that really pushed us, had us reading Jonathan Kozol [*The Night Is Dark and I Am Far from Home*] and took us into inner city Saint Louis schools and less privileged communities also and made sure that we were really stretching our own experiences that I learned that I had been really taught to be racist. That was really a horrifying thought to me. I remember sitting up all night, actually, with some of my dorm mates and just talking about it and sobbing and crying that oh, my gosh I've been taught to be afraid of someone because of the color of their skin. And so that experience at school, both being on a dry campus and still having a lot of real clear boundaries in my learning life, but then being pushed on my own education and my understanding of the world, was a really good baseline for what came

next. I had a strong sense of justice, and growing up in a small town and believing that you can do anything that you set your mind to.

**Sara** [00:10:31] I should just note one other thing. My mom started a children's choir when I was in sixth grade, my brother was in fourth grade, and my younger brother was several years behind. But she started that because she didn't want to drive the hour to Eugene where the children's choir was. So she just started it, and it became this huge organization that grew to give kids experience to travel all over the world and sing and interface with other cultures and have these amazing experiences. And then when my dad went to judge the Biathlon at the 1980 Winter Olympics and he didn't take her, she started her own singing telegram business. By the time he came back, we had people in ape suits coming in and out of our house, and we had a helium tank in our family room, and we had an answering machine that was going off every few hours saying, (sings) "I'm the girl from the Songbird Express. I'd love to talk to you, but I'm out of the nest, so leave your name and number when you hear the tone. And I'll call you right back. So stay by your phone. Thanks for calling." I mean, I could just hear it going off all hours of the day and night. So she also definitely taught me that if something doesn't exist, create it. And, so anyway, off to college and planned to be a secondary teacher ultimately.

**Jeff** [00:11:57] What took you to southern Illinois?

**Sara** [00:12:00] It's a small liberal arts school that is not run by the church, but it was based in Christian Science. So, there was also that connection and they offered a weekend review of the school in late junior year. You could pay 50 bucks and the school would pay for the rest of it. So for me, it was like, oh, I get a vacation for \$50. But then I ended up loving it and decided that was the only place that I wanted to apply to. It was on the bluffs of the Mississippi. It was gorgeous. It was designed by Bernard Maybeck, the famous architect, so it was Tudor style everywhere.

**Debbie** [00:12:46] What was the name of the school?

**Sara** [00:12:47] Oh, Principia College.

**Debbie** [00:12:52] And now that you've taken a breath. That was quite a happy childhood it sounds like to me. I'd like you to talk a little more. When you said you learned that you were taught to be a racist. That's a pretty powerful statement. Tell us what you mean by that.

**Sara** [00:13:12] Yeah, I think that what I mean by that is that I was taught well, first of all, I was taught to think that somebody who didn't look like me was strange or different or you might not know what their motives are. I mean, I think fear-based. And then also just biases. I don't mean to wish harm on someone else or to be pushed to say explicitly that someone is less important than you or less valuable than you. But all of the little biases that you don't realize you've been taught. For example, whenever a welfare program was talked about, there would always be a picture of a black family or a black person. And I realized through the education process -- Well, going to one of the family's homes for dinner one night, there was a girl who was in high school and so only a few years difference from my age. And she talked about that week going shopping with her girlfriend. This was a middle-class home, actually, a home that was much nicer than the one that I grew up in with two professors who were the parents in the home and, this teenage girl talked about going shopping at The Limited where I was used to going shopping. She talked about the experience of being followed around by the shopkeeper and given the impression that the shopkeeper thought that they were there to steal something. So some of it was understanding my own privilege, understanding that if I got pulled over by the police for speeding, which might have happened once or twice, that it was always sort of a game to me to see if I could get out of the ticket

as opposed to a potential existential threat. And so it was through those stories and understanding my own privilege and also my own implicit bias that had been shown to me through textbooks and through television commercials and online, even sitcoms, just all of the visuals. Or bias against people from different regions. I think about why should I think that someone has fewer needs or has less to contribute because they're from West Virginia and they had lost a bunch of work there which caused a lot of poverty. So I think that's really what I mean. I learned much, much later it was not just about race. It was really all of these social constructs to make us afraid of people who are not like us or not from where we're from, to keep the working class in check. And so full circle, I realized that racism and sexism especially, were some of the key tools of the elite to try to keep the masses from joining together and understanding our common humanity and our common struggles.

**Debbie** [00:17:04] Thank you for explaining that. And let me just ask again. I mean, you grew up in Corvallis, very white, very protected kind of environment, and then you're exposed to more. The [social] constructs that you said were designed to keep the working class divided. Did that insight come in college or later?

**Sara** [00:17:30] Later. Certainly later. In college, it was more of a sting that I had especially, I think, because of the religious background, and working so hard to be our better selves, to be more godlike, or more Christlike. Obviously that can't mean that I would think that I should be afraid of someone, or that I would think that they have the same privileges that I have or... So it was more of a sting at the time and something that I couldn't reconcile or understand where that came from. And so, yes, it wasn't until later that I really understood the real forces in capitalism that brought me to a much deeper understanding. In terms of wrestling with that capitalism, but then also doing organizing work where you have to break through any of these barriers or fears in order to build power for people to take on what is otherwise, all of the money and control that then assumes the power through that money and control.

**Jeff** [00:19:09] So let's dial it back to college again. You're going for a degree in secondary education. Is that what you started to say?

**Sara** [00:19:21] Yes, a degree in secondary education, mostly because I couldn't imagine having to do bulletin boards all the time.

**Jeff** [00:19:26] Right. And because there wasn't a major in being president, I guess.

**Sara** [00:19:34] (laughs) Yeah, I had left the president ideas.

**Jeff** [00:19:37] Oh, okay. That was gone.

**Sara** [00:19:39] Quite a while before. Yeah.

**Jeff** [00:19:42] But you've got these really remarkable female role models that you've grown up around between your mother and your grandmother and your aunt, that have said, look, you really can do anything. So how do you migrate from college into your next step in your career? What's next on the agenda there?

**Sara** [00:20:06] The only thing that I would say about that is that my younger brothers, especially my middle brother, was very clear that he wanted to be in politics. His friends all went to Boys State and they would sit around talking about, oh I would never inhale because that was the discussion at the time. I just remember all their “grown up” discussions in the house and thinking, “well, I'm going to live my life.” Not that I was necessarily into smoking weed or anything, but just

listening to them constraining themselves because they wanted to be able to say on a stage at some point they were the person that they thought that people would want them to be. And that was the part that I couldn't reconcile and also just had no interest in. So, yeah, I get through school and I had really life-changing experiences at school, including -- I'm going to do this part relatively quickly, being date raped at school and having to grapple with that and not really even understanding for sure what had happened to me and being in denial and then being in an education class about adolescent development and going through a chapter on date rape and everything that's being described is my experience. I got very quiet in class that week when usually I participated very much. The professor recognized that something was happening with me. She held me after the class, and then stayed up with me all night while I sort of worked through this and dealt with it. The reason that I bring that up is because that experience taught me what it is like to feel like someone is completely controlling you, to feel entirely powerless, and to not know if you're going to be okay and to just, also, do everything you can to survive. So I think that I had to work through a lot of things myself there, but I think ultimately the experience allowed me to be much more empathetic and understanding about what people can struggle with and what it can feel like to feel completely out of control.

**Jeff** [00:23:07] So you get your degree and where do you go from there? What's next?

**Sara** [00:23:14] So then, I still had to do my student teaching in the fall after I graduated, so went back to Saint Louis to do that. Lived in the city at the time with other Ed majors. And then once I finished that up, got an apartment with another classmate I had graduated with in U City in Saint Louis, near Wash[ington] U[niversity]. I was substitute teaching. I had a job essentially lined up for the fall. I had it in my mind that everyone should wait tables in their lives. So I went and auditioned, this is the way I saw it, auditioned all of the restaurants in Saint Louis that I thought I might want to work at, and ultimately decided there was only one place I wanted to work, and that was California Pizza Kitchen because it was the only place that said that because of their workers, they didn't allow smoking. And so I wanted to work in a smoke-free environment. They also had a training program for two weeks for their servers, and they had an English as a Second Language program for people who were coming to work there first in the kitchens and then encouraged them to move up through the company. So I liked the whole philosophy and it was also a place that my friends and I wanted to go to on the weekends when we were in college. So there were a lot of good feelings there. But I came and said, well, I have decided I'd like to work here. And they said, we don't have any openings. And I'm like, no, but I've chosen you so you're going to have to hire me. And they were like no. And so I just went back the next day and like, so do you have an opening for me yet? And I kept coming back for a few days and they said, well, listen, you can be a host for a little while until a server position opens up. And that's what I did and after a couple of weeks, I got into their training program to be a server. So I was working at California Pizza Kitchen all hours the restaurant was open, and then also working in a home store to try to get a discount for things that I needed for the apartment. And, I worked for a while as a temp and ended up getting assigned to a medical insurance company. They loved me. I would come in my tennis shoes, and I could file faster than any other temp they'd ever had because I used to have a paper route. I would make a game for myself to do these tasks and race myself, how quickly I could do it, but also give myself points for form too. That was throwing the paper and not hitting the door, hitting the mat just right. And filing, clearly I needed to file correctly. but they had these huge files and I would pick up the case folders and I noticed after doing this for three weeks in a row that there were certain names that kept coming through and they would be denied and then they would be filed. I probably shouldn't admit this, but I got a little curious about some of these names that I had seen and open it up and saw that people were dealing with horrific illnesses. I didn't fully understand our medical system at the time also because I was still practicing Christian Science. I had never even been to the doctor. But, I

remember taking note that, wow, why are they getting denied? They need help. These people need help.

**Sara** [00:26:57] So, anyway, it was those four jobs, and I was exhausted, and my best friend in college had become a flight attendant, and we had joked about it at the end of our senior year. She had been now flying for about 4 or 5 months and she called me from Miami Beach on this very snowy day in February and razzed me about the fact that she was standing there in the sand in her bikini talking to me on a payphone. Then she said, but actually Sara, this job is no joke and she went on to describe the pay that was going to be more than my first-year teacher pay. I was worried also because student loans were coming and I didn't know how I was going to set up my classroom and pay my student loans and be able to live. She talked about the flexibility on the job and she talked about the health care that was also applicable for women's health because women had been negotiating it and she talked about the pension that you could take at age 50. She did not say, I have a union, and this is all in a contract but obviously she was describing the contract that had been negotiated over 60 years at that point.

**Jeff** [00:28:08] And who was she flying for?

**Sara** [00:28:10] United. And so, ironically, it was the pension at age 23 that got me to get in my car the next day because she said, you can take it at age 50. And I thought, well, I'm 23. I'm exhausted. I would like to think about being done by 50. So, drove to Chicago the next day, interviewed with United Airlines, and there was a process for getting hired. But in a matter of months I was in training too with United.

**Debbie** [00:28:45] What year?

**Sara** [00:28:46] This is 1996.

**Debbie** [00:28:48] And they were hiring at that point?

**Sara** [00:28:51] They were hiring. They were actually hiring quite a lot at the time. This was during the Silicon Valley boom and United, especially, was doing well with their large San Francisco presence and things were pretty good for the airlines. They were hiring a lot and they actually had very significant requirements. You had to speak a second language at the time in order to get hired. I barely squeaked by on that with my four years of high school German and a couple years of college German to barely make it work. But I remember getting the job and I also remember going to that first open house and there were people who were standing in line crying because they wanted the job so badly. And I don't know anything about it, but I'm thinking like, whoa. They had tried to get hired 6 or 7 times. I was not asking my parents for any help at the time. First of all, I was very much becoming my own person and having that little out-of-the-nest syndrome. But also, I had gone to this expensive school, and they thought that I should use the education that I had gotten. And so later when they got the travel benefits that all went away. But, I was not asking them for help. I remember going to the training you had to dress in business attire every single day. You had to do your hair a certain way. You had to put on makeup. You had to do all of those things and you could be released from training if you didn't have some of these things in place. And I had, I think, three shirts and two pairs of slacks that could pass for business attire. I had to wash them out in the sink and make everything work and somehow made it through the training. During that training, actually, the few guys that we had in our class got the day off this one day because it was makeup day. A representative from Bobbi Brown came and showed us how to put on makeup and if we could not show that we already had some of these makeup items, we were required to buy some. So without getting a salary of any kind, I was required to buy some of this makeup and then wear it,

and the guys got the day off. I started my career also in two-inch heels that we were required to wear. We talked about them as our concourse shoes by that time. At least the union had been successful in saying we needed aisle shoes and concourse shoes. So everyone, all the women, would bring two sets of shoes. You'd wear your concourse shoes through the airport and then you'd switch into your aisle shoes for on the plane that would be flats and you save your feet a little bit.

**Jeff** [00:32:14] And this is 1996.

**Sara** [00:32:16] 1996.

**Jeff** [00:32:16] This isn't like 1950.

**Sara** [00:32:18] No, but in 1993, that was the last time that flight attendants had to step on a weight scale when they came to work. So it'd only been a few years since that was in place.

**Debbie** [00:32:32] When you were on the concourse, you weren't working, correct?

**Sara** [00:32:36] No, but passengers could see me and they could see everything. It's actually harder to see flight attendants' feet when they're working on the plane because you have to really work at looking over into the aisle. But when we're walking through the concourse, the airline wanted to have a certain look. This was not that long since they were putting up ads that said things like, "I'm Cheryl, fly me to Mexico," and really used flight attendants as a marketing tool and sold sex.

**Debbie** [00:33:09] And what else did they do? Your makeup day. Did you have hair day?

**Sara** [00:33:14] I think makeup and hair day might have been the same day. Yeah. Yeah.

**Debbie** [00:33:19] When did they get rid of high heels on the concourse?

**Sara** [00:33:24] I think we got that done during the bankruptcy. I have a great story about that actually.

**Debbie** [00:33:31] So what year was it?

**Sara** [00:33:34] That flight, I think, was 2004.

**Jeff** [00:33:39] Okay, so you make it through the training. Where do you get domiciled then? Where do you start out from?

**Sara** [00:33:46] They sent me to Boston. Boston had recently opened. So there were about 100 flight attendants who were very senior who had been commuting from Boston for a very long time and suddenly were able to fly out of their home base. But then they were filling Boston with new hires. I was in the first full training class to be sent to Boston and there were several that came behind us. One of the last days of training. The credit union came in, signed us all up for an account. That's where we were getting our paychecks and also they would give a loan of \$1,000 to new hires because we had not been paid at all in training. We were also required to pay for our uniforms. We were sent to Boston. The union contract said that we got a week in a hotel. We actually did not enforce that. So we shared rooms. It was supposed to be single rooms. There was no one really looking out for that and the airline got away with what they could, but the union had negotiated for us at least that we would get this hotel room for a week. But you were sent to these cities that maybe you'd never been to before and you were expected to have accommodations and



the ability to answer the phone and get to the airport in a couple hours, within a week. And typically also during that week you were already getting an assignment. So you might have been gone for a few days during the time that you had your week in the hotel.

**Sara** [00:35:34] It wasn't until about three weeks into the job that my roommates, we did find an apartment. We signed the lease before they had finished doing the work on it in the North End of Boston. It's two stops from the airport. Our union contract did also get us a T pass, a subway pass to get back and forth to the airport, thank goodness. But it was seven of us in this small apartment in the North End and all my roommates got their paycheck after a few weeks on the job, and my paycheck didn't drop into my bank account. So I went into the office and asked what the issue was and the person behind the desk said, well, people get their first paychecks at different times for different reasons. We're sure you will get it next time. And I remember thinking in my head, I have \$12 in my account. I have no idea how I'm going to make ends meet, but I'm on probation. You just need to suck it up and figure it out. So I left and prayed for the phone to call so that I would get a flight assignment and I could at least eat some plane food. And, if I'm being really honest, I would try to work first-class so that I could get a few dates. Those were steak and lobster nights. (laughs) Then I somehow made it through those two weeks, filled in the gaps with Top Ramen because I could have one of those for \$0.10. Then got to the next payday and while I was waiting for the paycheck to drop, because this wasn't in the day when it came in at midnight, I took a flight to Chicago and back, the early flight to Chicago and back, so I could eat some more plane food. Because no one was at home in my house, we didn't have any food in the cupboards. So when I landed in Boston, I checked my bank account and there's nothing in it. I went down into the office right away and said, okay, this can't be right. I didn't get my paycheck again and I started to get some of the same response. Oh, people get their first paychecks at different times for different reasons. And I realized for the first time, oh my god, this is what it means to just be a number. And it was really the first time in my life that I had ever had that experience. I became pretty desperate and I started to get more excited than someone on probation should. And the tears started to come because rent was due the next day. It wasn't just for me. My roommates were counting on me too. So I had this tap on the shoulder and I turned around and there's someone standing there who looks a lot like me. She's wearing the same uniform. I do remember her AFA pin right above her wings. And she asked me how to spell my name. She handed me a check for \$800 and she said, number one you go take care of yourself and number two, you call our union. I did have my paycheck the next day. But I always tell everyone that was the moment when I was hooked on our union because I learned that in our union we're never alone. And through our union, we can be organized about the care that we have for each other and make the most out of it.

**Jeff** [00:39:13] So you literally got on a plane, flew to Chicago, not working, just a free flight benefit. Yeah. Jump seating and then jump seating back so that you'd have something to eat.

**Sara** [00:39:26] Yes.

**Jeff** [00:39:27] That's incredible. I mean, it's just like, seven, eight hours of time to grab a meal, basically.

**Sara** [00:39:41] Yes. And at the time we still had to wear our uniform if we were jump seating. I didn't have my flight benefits yet, so I had to sit on that jumpsuit. Passengers also assumed I was working and wondered why I was sitting there.

**Debbie** [00:39:57] Those were the days when the airline still served meals.

**Sara** [00:40:01] Yes. Yes.

**Jeff** [00:40:03] Correct.

**Sara** [00:40:04] Correct.

**Jeff** [00:40:05] Do you remember the name of the flight attendant that was behind you at the desk there.

**Sara** [00:40:11] Kathleen Callahan.

**Jeff** [00:40:13] No kidding.

**Sara** [00:40:17] Well, I didn't know her name until she handed me her check.

**Jeff** [00:40:23] That's amazing.

**Debbie** [00:40:24] And when you started then there wasn't an orientation from the union to sign you up?

**Sara** [00:40:30] So there was. There was an orientation from the union. And they even took us on a trolley ride around Boston and we got the most incredible welcome from the union. But they didn't think to tell us about when we get our paychecks. They didn't think ahead to the problems we might have. And I didn't have any experience with unions so it didn't occur to me to call the union from the start. That just was not something that had sunk in yet. I just thought these are the people that I have a good time with.

**Debbie** [00:41:11] And am I correct that in the airlines, everyone, every flight attendant, if you're in a bargaining unit has to be a member.

**Sara** [00:41:22] Yes. Right-to-work laws --

**Debbie** [00:41:23] So they didn't have to sign you up.

**Sara** [00:41:25] Well they do. Technically you have to sign a membership application and you also have to sign a form if you're going to have dues check-off, if you're going to have dues deducted from your paycheck, which is the easiest way to pay your dues and the way that the union tries to sign everyone up. So there was an orientation, we had negotiated it in the United contract years earlier for a two-hour introduction from the union on one of your last days of training in Chicago. So I did that.

**Debbie** [00:42:00] Just to be clear, then, everybody who was a flight attendant for United has to be a member of the union. You can't opt out.

**Sara** [00:42:09] Well, you can opt out, but you're going to be an agency fee payer.

**Debbie** [00:42:13] Okay.

**Sara** [00:42:14] And so everyone signs up because if you're going to be paying dues, or they're not called dues, they're fees at that point, and of course there's a slight discount. But for the most part, everyone wants to be a part of the union. I have to say that I got quite an education in Boston when I first started because it had been 11 years since the 1985 pilot strike where our union, the flight

attendants, went out on a sympathy strike, legal under the Railway Labor Act with the pilots. There were people who still carried scab lists as if the strike had been the week before. So it was very much if you were not a member of the union, if you were not wearing your union pin, you were in jeopardy of being ostracized from the whole crew. It was very clear that it was important to be a part of the union. I had to learn more about what that meant. As I spent time with people on the job, I learned what that meant. But coming into this, I didn't have any background of what it meant to be a union member.

**Jeff** [00:43:31] So, Kathleen lights the spark in you for trade unionism. How does that grow from there to become the flame that it is today?

**Sara** [00:43:44] There were a few other things that happened. Because I had called the local for help, they called me and said, hey, would you like to volunteer to do union work? We could actually use someone who would be willing to do the new-hire presentations when new hires come to Boston. Of course I said yes, well this should never happen to anyone else. Of course, I'm going to do this. I also had no idea that people said “no” to these things. But I was very, very honored that they were asking me. My class arrived on October 16th. By Christmas, my roommates were teasing me that I was the union girl and actually had created two earrings out of our union pin, and that was my present that they gave me for Christmas. So, in that short amount of time, I was getting razed as the radical union girl.

**Jeff** [00:44:50] Very cool. And so from there, what's your first, steward's position or --

**Sara** [00:45:02] We were already in contract negotiations. There was a failed TA [tentative agreement] just before I got on the property. It was about a year later that we negotiated the next TA. I thought that the contract stunk. By that time, I was doing the new-hire presentations, and I had also taken on the communications chairperson position. My probation exit interview was also a day of picketing. So I did my probation exit interview and then went out and led cheers on the picket line. Some of the flight attendants started calling me “Sara Da Mouth.” That was my nickname. So when the contract came out six months later, I looked at it and I thought, this is not what I was expecting and worked very hard to get it voted down. I think it passed by one percentage point. But my work in Boston meant that we turned out an 80% no vote. People were very angry. It was a smaller base, so it didn't have as much of an impact, but I had already learned how to organize pretty well. In fact, actually the company tried to fire me during that time because I had used company communications to encourage people to vote no. The local president said to the company, well, if you're going to fire her, then you have to fire all the people who sent messages saying to vote yes. I remember that very clearly in that experience. I also remember going out on that picket line and we were marching in front of the doors that were the automatic sliding doors. It opened into this atrium in Boston Terminal C that had very high ceilings. And so as we were shouting and the doors would open, it would echo into the entire terminal. The management came out to complain about this and got the police and said this isn't right. I remember standing there right next to the local president and he said, “well, I'd love to get them under control, but they're just very angry. I can't.” I remember taking all of this in and saying, oh, I see how this works. We can have a lot of fun. So anyway, I'd gotten very into , this is what we do, this is what we're going to fight for. I had all the strike stories too, and really embraced this whole idea of taking on the company and getting what was our due.

**Sara** [00:47:43] I went to the union meeting after the contract had been voted in and people were angry and they're throwing down their union pins, and I'm thinking, oh, that looks good. And then what happened in the middle of that union meeting for me was that Kathleen flashed in front of my face. I thought about her. I thought about all the people that I had met on the jump seat and on the

planes, incredible people, and I thought, well, this is our union. We're just gonna fix it. So, I got more involved and I was definitely a dissident voice. By that time, we had already had an election, so I was now what you call a Council Rep in AFA, might be like a union steward in another union, and had been doing grievances and started to get trained in all of our different committees, the hotel committee, the occupational committee, the scheduling committee. I kind of flunked out of that one. I had to handle that, and would give a lot of my days off in the union office, answering the phone and helping people every single day. This is all volunteer work.

**Sara** [00:48:57] But then, I would go to the national meetings and always have some very harsh words for everyone. What are we doing? And so they kept giving me one job after another until actually they made me the national strike chair. During the proposed United/US Airways merger that was going to create a unilateral change to our contract so we were saying that we would have the right to strike if they moved forward without negotiating with us. So turned out a very strong strike vote at the time. The company also tried to fire me once again because I was in the lounge talking to people about the strike vote. They sent a supervisor to give me a direct order to leave and I said, "well, I'll leave today, but this is my right to be here and so you better get it together because I'm coming tomorrow." I came back and I remember the supervisors running, and saying "she's here, she's here." There was so much fear and here I was just this -- I knew who I was. I was this non-threatening, but clear about my rights and about justice and they were terrified. So I made them give me a direct order and went through this whole process where the company ultimately did not fire me because I don't think that they wanted to create a martyr. But they gave me a suspension and we filed in federal court to fight that. We had the court hearing on September 7th of 2001 and the court accepted the case which was the first big hurdle. Ultimately, because September 11th happened five days later, we ultimately ended up settling, of course affirming all of our federal rights and the ability to talk with our fellow c-coworkers in non-work areas at non-work times about anything including a strike vote. So that all led up to 9/11 when we were also --

**Debbie** [00:51:22] Can I stop you?

**Sara** [00:51:23] Yes.

**Debbie** [00:51:25] 9/11 is a big topic. You mentioned a few things that are different under the Railway Labor Act that I wanted to slow down about. First of all, you were taking a strike vote?

**Sara** [00:51:45] We took a strike vote.

**Debbie** [00:51:48] Don't you have to go through a whole process before you can take a strike vote?

**Sara** [00:51:54] Well, you can essentially take a strike vote any time you want to. The union calls the strike vote. That doesn't necessarily mean that then you're right on strike. It just authorizes the strike from the members. And then there would be the process to determine when the legal strike deadline would be. In this case what we were saying was that this would be a unilateral change to the contract. It's another provision of the law. It's not a normal negotiations' strike deadline that goes through all of the procedures to try to get to that right to strike. If the company moved forward without negotiating and created this unilateral change, we were arguing that we had the legal right then to strike. And so this was the threat in order to get them to negotiate with us.

**Debbie** [00:52:44] And the merger had already occurred?

**Sara** [00:52:46] No. So the merger never happened. Actually, we killed the merger. We were opposed to the merger as well, but we were saying if the merger was going to go forward, it was

going to create this unilateral change which means that they needed to negotiate with us. Because the merger never happened, none of that ever came to fruition. But that was all still in play. Actually, it hadn't completely died out before 9/11.

**Debbie** [00:53:15] Okay. When they suspended you, disciplined you, you said you went to court.

**Sara** [00:53:26] The union went to court.

**Debbie** [00:53:28] Help me out here Jeff. That's different than under the National Labor Relations Act, correct?

**Jeff** [00:53:34] Yes. Absolutely.

**Debbie** [00:53:37] But under the Railway Labor Act, you have a grievance and then you go to court?

**Sara** [00:53:44] Under the Railway Labor Act, everything is remanded to arbitration unless it is a major dispute. And so that first hurdle of determining that this was a major dispute, a major violation of our federal rights, essentially. The court did determine prior to September 11th that this was a major dispute and the court was accepting the case. We would have had to go through the same sort of process on what I'm talking about with the merger that would have created this unilateral change. The Railway Labor Act does speak to impact bargaining. It's just rarely triggered because airlines don't typically take on a big fight like that or make a big change that would trigger something that would qualify as a major dispute.

**Debbie** [00:54:42] And ultimately US airways merged with American. Correct?

**Sara** [00:54:46] Yes. Later. Much later. Yes.

**Jeff** [00:54:50] So, in hindsight would it have been better for them to merge with United, do you think?

**Sara** [00:54:54] God, I'm tortured with that almost every day. (laughs) Maybe so, but at the time we were simply opposed to any merger frankly. One of the arguments that we had made against deregulation was that it would lead to consolidation and that all this choice that was supposedly going to happen would be taken away anyway.

**Debbie** [00:55:21] Why were you opposed to that merger?

**Sara** [00:55:26] Well, first of all, we saw this as an opportunity. When I talked about the contract that was barely voted in, that contract was a ten-year contract. So here was an opportunity for us to actually negotiate some improvements that otherwise we wouldn't have had the chance to negotiate for another five years at that point. So there was that. But also, United Airlines flight attendants did have this idea that we were the premier airline in the industry, and one of the ways that the airlines would keep workers from creating solidarity is to make them feel like the workers are different or in different classes. So I have to say that one of the reasons that we were opposed to it was very much falling prey to some of the corporate narrative about being a different type of worker.

**Jeff** [00:56:42] Yeah. So all that aside, 9/11 hits then. So more than any other group of people or industry, the impact it had on the AFA was just incredible. Can you walk us through a little bit of that experience?

**Sara** Yeah. So I had just landed in Chicago that morning from the West Coast. (I had gone out to the West Coast to see friends.)

**Jeff** [00:57:17] And you're still domiciled in Boston at the time, right.

**Sara** [00:57:22] Yes, yes. I went directly from DC where we were in court arguing on the crew room issue, out to the West Coast for a day or two. Then I had a union training for the occupational committee on September 11th. It was scheduled for that day. And so I had taken the all-nighter. I went to the Hilton fitness center. The Hilton was connected to O'Hare. I had about four hours before I was supposed to be at the training and I didn't already have a hotel room. This was a union event, not my flight attendant gig. If it had been a flight attendant working trip, I would have been able to go get a hotel. But I knew I wasn't going to be able to go anywhere to lay down for a little bit. I also knew that at the Hilton there was a massage table that wouldn't be used for several hours and I had gotten to know the staff very well because I had worked turns to Chicago purposely the summer before so that I could go workout for the three-hour sit that we were in Chicago. So I knew all of them. I knew that they would give me the massage table to sleep on, and that's where I went to go to.

**Sara** One of the staff at the fitness club came in and woke me up and said, Sara, Sara, I'm sure you'd want to know. A plane just flew into the World Trade Center. And I was like, what? Okay. And so I got out of the room and went into the main part of the fitness center and I'm staring up at the TV. Now all the cameras are trained on the World Trade Center. I watched what I learned later was Flight 175 fly into the South Tower. I'd worked the flight the week earlier. It was a favorite trip in Boston. Trans-cons were sort of the most senior trips. You could be very efficient. One flight and then have 24 hours in San Francisco or LA. I knew everyone on the plane and I also knew that my best friend who called me from Miami Beach, we were in Boston together and I had been bidding for her and I had been bidding that flight. So at the moment in the fitness center, I didn't know any of that. I just knew that, okay, this is not some accident now. This is a big deal and I need to get to the union office right now. They had still been saying that the first plane was maybe a Cessna. Nobody really knew what was going on yet. But actually as I was standing there, I remember there was reporting from the Pentagon and the reporter said it sounds like a bomb has gone off at the Pentagon. So I got on the hotel van that took us over to the hotel that we stayed at but also was right next to the union office. I remember just, like, sobbing on the van because I knew at this point we're under attack. I knew that my world was changing. I didn't know how much yet, but got into the union office and it was just a normal morning for everyone in there. And I said, "you have to turn on the TV." Our officers were not there because they had already been called by United Airlines and they had gone straight to the crisis room at United Airlines we learned very soon after that.

**Sara** There I am in the union office and we were having briefings every 15 minutes. We were pulling all of the crew lists from all the planes that we knew were in the air trying to track down where everyone was and then getting briefings as intelligence was coming in. The American Flight 11 was identified fairly early. So already I knew, that was just so close to home. But I remember standing in the vice-president's office for one of these 15 minute briefings and hearing Flight 175 and everything started to go dark. One of the women who had not necessarily been very friendly towards me as this young yippie dissident in the union. She had never even said hello to me before. [She] caught me and held me, stayed with me for the rest of the day and sort of became my mother at the moment. I knew that I needed to just be with my friends. I found two people who wanted to get back to Boston. We rented a car and I started driving back to Boston. There were no flights. And, I remember we just kept driving together, and we had a rule that we would not turn on the radio. We could only talk about happy things. And so if anything started to turn, it was a rule that

we had to talk about something happy. And every overpass that we went under had an American flag on it already. We were only out on the road with trucks. There were no vacationers. Nobody was on the road for any other reason. I remember driving into Boston and realizing there's no planes in the air, which was very strange because I lived near the airport and that's all I had known in Boston.

**Sara** [01:03:28] We got straight over to the crisis room at the Hilton at the airport. It was a brand new hotel at the time, and we got into our crisis room where there were 100 flight attendants. At the time the base had grown quickly to about 800 flight attendants. We were focused on getting everyone home and it took six days to get all the crews back into Boston. They were stranded all over the world. The airport was shut down. They were only taking incoming flights. There were no commercial flights taking off or departing during most of that week. And we would go with American flags and greet the passengers, singing patriotic songs as they were coming off the planes. And then sitting in the crisis room and we would have gatherings. We were calling people at home telling them to come because people were in shock sitting at home. I remember the suicide calls that we got and the people who had been in recovery for a long time and were drinking again or finding some other way to kill the pain. There was a lot at stake.

**Sara** [01:05:00] Then very quickly, there were the announcements about the furloughs too. But, we planned a crew member memorial in Boston that 40,000 people came to and we did this with the American Airlines flight attendants too. My friend Robert Fangman who was on Flight 175 and had the same birthday I had, had only been flying for eight months. Because I was doing the new hire presentations, I knew all the new hires. I had been there. I remember that he came out with us that night after his orientation, and he got word that he was released from reserve assignment the next day. So we stayed up all night, we bowled, he went back and crashed on my couch. We were very close, and we would joke every time we saw each other and say, “you're the wind beneath my wings” and we would run into each other's arms. He had come from finance, but for the first time, he was able to live his life openly as a gay man. And he loved it. He said, “I've never been at home and I feel at home here.” I said in the crisis room to everyone, I said, “we have to have Bette Midler come and sing at the memorial.” And they said, “Sara, are you crazy?” *Like we've got enough to do. What are you doing?* But I said “flight attendants are amazing. Somebody is going to know how to get in touch with Bette Midler. I'm sure if we just let her know she'll come.” So I asked everyone. (laughs) I came into our crisis room. “Do you know how we can get in touch with Bette Midler?” And literally, the other reps were shaking their heads and within an hour and a half, a flight attendant said, “oh, yeah, I used to be Steven Spielberg's personal assistant. I'll call Steven.” And, so he did. And within an hour we were in touch with Bette Midler and made plans for her to come. She was scared to fly. So we had to get Amtrak to have a whole car dedicated to her. She had to have her back-up singers and her musicians and we set up this whole thing. We got everybody to donate everything. Then we got word that she would only stay at a Four Seasons [hotel]. So I went to the Four Seasons, and I said, “I can't tell you who” because we didn't want this to be about her either, we wanted it to be about the crews. We wanted it to be a surprise. I said “I can't tell you who, but a celebrity is coming for this big event and will you donate these rooms?” They said no. Then I went and I got the other big name hotels. I went and got them to agree to do it and I went back to the Four Seasons and I said, “*The [Boston] Globe* is only one phone call away. How do you want this to go?” So they said, “fine, we'll give you the rooms.” Anyway, we did all of this. We had the crew memorial. Bette Midler came out. Robert's family was standing in front of me. They turned around and said, “we saw this on the program, but that's Bette Midler.” I said, “yeah. She came for Robert.” So, we did that. We had each of the crew members symbolized by a rose and the uniform behind them. Those roses went on a special flight down to New York and we had a burial ceremony down at Ground Zero.

**Sara** [01:08:40] Then that crisis room turned into a furlough support room because 20% of the flight attendants were furloughed almost immediately. In Boston because that had been a very junior base, that meant half of our base was facing furlough. These were the roommates of our crew members and people who were trying to figure out their lives. About three weeks in, I worked my first flight after 9/11. I remember sitting in the back of the airplane and we didn't have new procedures in place yet. But the crew member that I was working with, we decided together that we were not going to take off in a normal brace position, but that we were going to take off with our hands around her neck. That way, if someone reached around and tried to slit our throats, they would get our hands and not our throats. That's how people were coping and trying to think about how to remain safe. Everyone was on alert and we had to get new procedures in place. Of course, no one wanted to fly. Everyone was scared to fly. That led to then all the bankruptcies and United Airlines being the longest one, 38 months long in bankruptcy. We were successful in getting the bankruptcy law changed for other airline bankruptcies. But not for United. We fought them every which way we could. At this point now I was elected to serve as the national communications chairperson and essentially then was posted up in Chicago even though I was still based in Boston, still had a place in Boston. But that first year of the bankruptcy, I spent 12 nights in my bed in Boston and otherwise I was in Chicago working around the clock, dealing with more furloughs, dealing with base closures, dealing with emergency pay cuts, and then the fulsome [bankruptcy] Section 1113, very painful contract cuts, that were across-the-board. I should just make this note. The very first contract negotiated for flight attendants in 1946, and one of the four major pillars that we got in that contract, including a double digit raise, a seniority list so that managers could no longer try to coerce flight attendants to trade sex for schedules and an eight-hour day and a cap on the number of hours that we could fly. Both that cap and that eight-hour day were taken in that bankruptcy process.

**Jeff** [01:11:24] So how do you recover from that then? You're on this trajectory as well at the same time within the union. So talk about how those two sort of relate to each other going forward.

**Sara** [01:11:38] Yeah. So, the bankruptcy started December 9th, 2002. Here I was working around the clock, and we had already been working, because we had put in for the Air Transportation Stabilization Act loan guarantee that was denied by the Bush White House towards United Airlines after all the unions had agreed to take pay cuts too, much like they required in 2008 of auto workers. Then they denied that and of course then we're in bankruptcy and the cuts are much steeper. United waited so long to file for bankruptcy that the cash flow was so low that the threat of liquidation was very serious. We got a space on the creditors committee so we know exactly what was going on. The bondholders were advocating for liquidation. They would have gotten more out of it. We had the very rich routes that were worth nothing at that time because no one was flying. We had no cash. We had no way really to raise money. No one wanted to give money to airlines either. And then we had the operational performance of the airline which everyone said was going to be terrible because morale was going to be terrible. It was only the employees that saved United Airlines because it was the only metric that was good in that creditors committee [assessment] and gave just enough of an argument to get debtor-in-possession lending to keep the airline going and go through the entire bankruptcy process.

**Sara** [01:13:19] But there was the first big round of cuts that included a change to our retiree health care. One of the big things that we did was make sure that there would be a six-week window where flight attendants could retire under the old retiree health care provisions because there were so many people who were keeping the job only because they had very serious health conditions. And 2600 flight attendants decided to retire during that time which was more than had retired in the entire history of United Airlines. Then three months later, the CFO said, "oh, we made an accounting error



and now we're going to have to use the provision in the bankruptcy code that allows us to cancel retiree health care.” So we put up a big fight.

**Sara** [01:14:10] What was happening at the same time actually was because AFA had lost 20% of our membership, 20% of our revenue overnight that there was an effort going on with our national office to try to find a merger partner, to work to find another union that we could merge with because we had lost all this revenue and our expenses were more than they had ever been having to defend all of these workers in all these different bankruptcies. So, we talked with several unions. We talked with ALPA [Airline Pilots Association, International] who basically said, “we don't want you back.” We have a proposal from the Machinists. We talked with SEIU. We talked with a few others and we talked with CWA. CWA was the only union that would confirm that we could keep our identity and our own decision-making and also agreed to cover the rest of our expenses for a period of four years, so that we were not having to go to the members with a dues increase. Now, I have to be honest, I worked very hard against approval of the merger. I wanted to retain our union. But it did pass. There was a full membership vote and it passed by a slim margin. But on the ballot it was do you want to pay six more dollars in dues or do you want to merge with CWA? Looking back on it, it was a really good fit. CWA wanted to have the credibility of having a union that was used to working with the RLA [Railway Labor Act] for organizing the [reservations and gate] agents and other workers in the airline industry. And for us, we were merging with a union that had fought many of the same battles we fought with telecom, with telephone operators who, reading the description of their job, and I would do this actually at many of the new-hire presentations, sounded very much like the description of a flight attendant. So there was actually a shared history there too.

**Sara** [01:16:31] Coming back to this retiree health care fight. We were in the middle of that right as we were consummating the marriage. We were signed up for the defense fund and before we had even made a first dollar of deposit into the defense fund from the dues, we put forward an application to help us fight this termination of retiree health care. So we got a defense fund grant in order to do that. The idea was that we would get radio ads, we would get print ads, and we would get billboards. So I was charged with implementing this plan. Half of the newspapers in the country just refused our business because they didn't want to take on United Airlines. They didn't have to say that, but it was very obvious. Most of the billboards were owned by CLEAR and they had no interest in helping workers. So we had to do some very watered-down thing that was like retiree health care matters, as opposed to the very strong message that we wanted to have. But in the newspapers, we were going to run these full-page ads in all these newspapers across the country, including USA Today on a Sunday that February in 2004. The Friday before these were supposed to run the San Francisco Chronicle called us, where we had bought ad space and they said, “nope, sorry, we must have screwed up but we don't have room for your ad.” There were [Newspaper] Guild members who worked at the San Francisco Chronicle. We called the local steward for the Guild. And, a few of the Guild members got around a water cooler and started speaking very loudly about the fact that, “did you hear that 200 flight attendants are going to be down here at the San Francisco Chronicle this Sunday picketing over the Chronicle's refusal to allow them to use their free speech rights?” So the marketing department called us back within an hour and said, “oh, we found space to run your ad.” I think we had a quarter of a million dollars in this defense fund plan. We bought these ads all over. We had, “If retiree health care matters, send us an email here.” So it ran in all these newspapers nationwide. The same weekend we had retirees out at the airports picketing. I mean, a ragtag group of like 12 retirees here, it was that not that big a deal. We got one email from all of those ads, but we learned the real power of being connected with workers everywhere to be in every space, to share the workers' message, and then also we got barely any exposure with the paid-for ads, but the picketing got us a front-page story on USA Today and the Chicago Tribune. The Chicago Tribune, who had refused our business for the ad, too. So, it was a real lesson in solidarity, but also in the value of workers coming together in a union, even when you

maintain the very focused efforts on the specific jobs, but understanding that our fight is the same across the labor movement.

**Jeff** [01:20:11] So how does the retiree health care battle shake out?

**Sara** [01:20:16] Oh, well, we won. We got a negotiated settlement that increased the cost of the retiree health care by ten times. But what that means is that retirees went from paying \$10 a month for their health insurance to \$100 a month which was a lot on a fixed income, but certainly not the unlimited amount that it was going to go to. And all of those retirees were able to maintain that health care.

**Jeff** [01:20:47] Great story.

**Sara** [01:20:50] Then we had the same fight with the pensions and I'll just do that one a little bit faster. We had to try to help people understand the importance of the pension. So we spent a year educating on the importance of the pensions. Instead people were arguing that we needed to focus on shoes because they did not want to wear uncomfortable shoes and they wanted to be able to wear Danskos like nurses wear because we were having to work more. This became even more of an issue than it had ever been. I remember getting so angry and thinking "they're holding the planes together with duct tape, for god's sakes. Just wear your comfortable shoes and tell the supervisor to go stuff it. Get out on the picket lines for our pensions." But people were not ready to hear that. So we put together a petition. We ran a whole issue campaign in the course of a month. We were very quick about it. We got the airline to change the shoe policy, and then we had everyone's attention and they knew that they could make change within their workplace. We finally had people paying attention again. Prior to that everybody was in shock. It was only because of our union we were able to fight and do anything. But now we had the members with us for the end of this fight. That is then when we took another strike vote to try to preserve our pensions. We were the only union that ended up fighting for our pensions. Ultimately, the court allowed termination, when \$80 million would have saved the pensions. Just a few months later, the court approved \$400 million for the executives in that bankruptcy. But what we did was we generated enough power to have Barack Obama serve as a mediator to call the CEO of United Airlines to his office and he mediated the settlement between United and the union for double what the company wanted to pay for a pension replacement plan.

**Debbie** [01:22:51] Barack as senator or as president?

**Sara** [01:22:53] Senator.

**Jeff** [01:22:55] From Illinois.

**Sara** [01:22:57] From Illinois. Yes. And there's a lot of stories in that too. We protested [Senator Dick] Durbin and Obama and tried to get them to introduce legislation. That legislation would have been dead on arrival. We got it passed in the House. At the time the Republicans had the trifecta, they had the White House and they had both chambers of Congress. And even with that, with [Representative] George Miller and [Representative] Jan Schakowsky, we put up a huge fight. We had the very first ever online congressional hearing. We submitted 10,000 stories of testimonies from flight attendants about what this would mean and we encouraged all the other work groups to submit stories too about what the termination of these pensions would mean. And we actually won the vote in the House to save our pensions. But no one would introduce the legislation in the Senate. Finally, [Senator] Teddy Kennedy did. He said it would be more important for it to come from Illinois, and it would have been, and so we were trying to push Durbin and Obama to do that. But

what we were able to do was push Obama to serve as mediator for these discussions that otherwise probably wouldn't have come to a conclusion and we may have ended that bankruptcy without any replacement retirement plan if we had not generated that kind of power and attention.

**Debbie** [01:24:20] What year was the end of the bankruptcy?

**Sara** [01:24:24] The bankruptcy ended February 2nd, 2006.

**Debbie** [01:24:29] And all this time you are communications chair for all of AFA?

**Sara** [01:24:35] For all of AFA at United.

**Debbie** [01:24:39] And that's an elected position? it's not a staff position, am I correct?

**Sara** [01:24:45] It's an elected position. Yeah. Yep. And I was also serving as our strike chair again.

**Jeff** [01:24:56] So 23 year-old Sara would have been very proud of you protecting that pension.

**Sara** [01:25:02] 23 year-old Sara never would have imagined that I would have been working that hard. But it was those first six months of that bankruptcy. The call from the company at one point when we already had 7000 people out on furlough to call with another 2500 furloughs. I can pinpoint the exact moment that I knew how I was going to spend my life because I was reporting bad news every single day. And I realized that the deck was completely stacked against us but we had to fight to hang on to everything we possibly could in order to live to fight for what we were truly due. Because I was still coming off of that first contract that I didn't like and I wanted to push forward. And so actually, I feel like we're finally in the moment right now that we're really able to push forward on the career.

**Jeff** [01:26:05] It's interesting. I've taken a few flights over the past month and all United because they used to have a hub here in Cleveland. Everybody to a person is wearing their AFA pin or their AFA lanyards. My wife kids me because for years I've been giving away a Starbucks gift card to any flight attendant wearing an AFA pin. So when I get on, if I see you with an AFA pin, we're in the same union here. Here, have a cup of coffee on me. And my wife says we're spending way more on Starbucks these days than we did in the past because everybody on the flights has AFA paraphernalia.

**Sara** [01:26:52] You might have to move to Hershey's Kisses. (laughs)

**Jeff** [01:26:56] Yeah. Well, maybe. They don't travel as well as Starbucks gift cards.

**Debbie** [01:27:05] I just have to get this on the record. Who was president of the AFA when the [AFA-CWA] merger happened.

**Sara** [01:27:11] Pat Friend.

**Debbie** [01:27:13] And she remained the president of AFA and then CWA vice-president of the sector for a number of years, correct?

**Sara** [01:27:25] Well, actually, it's interesting because the merger agreement doesn't talk about the AFA president being a vice-president at all. And in fact, just sort of like CWA Canada or the News Guild. It's the AFA-CWA president that's a member of the executive board.

**Jeff** [01:27:43] Right.

**Debbie** [01:27:45] I think when she joined, she may have been at that point along with [secretary-treasurer] Barbara Easterling the only other woman [on the CWA executive board].

**Sara** [01:27:53] I think that may be right.

**Debbie** [01:27:55] If the Guild had already come in then you had Linda Foley.

**Sara** [01:28:00] The Guild was in I think two years before us. So Linda Foley was on the board. And, it's also why, after we split from ALPA, we were no longer a part of the AFL-CIO. But we got our charter with the AFL-CIO in I believe it was 1983. And one of the reasons that we not only got a charter and then the AFA president served as a general board member. But we were put on the AFL-CIO Executive Council because the AFA president had always been a woman and they were looking to diversify the council at least a little bit, even if in name only if not fully in the spirit yet.

**Jeff** [01:28:50] So when do you decide to run for president of AFA? And how does that come about?

**Sara** [01:28:55] Yeah. Well, so after we exited bankruptcy and we were in the mode of fighting United all the time. In 2008, actually, I should go back. I helped with the election to bring Northwest flight attendants back into AFA in 2006. Helped them get set up, helped them through their bankruptcy. Of course, we all worked very hard to get Obama elected because one of the big things that we wanted to do was to change the rules at the National Mediation Board under the RLA that no longer would a non-vote be counted as a no vote in a union organizing election which was a big deal for organizing Delta Air Lines. So sort of coming off of the Northwest bankruptcy and then understanding that the plan for the Delta bankruptcy was actually to purchase Northwest and create this new airline. We knew also that we would have this big fight to try to keep the Northwest contract. All of that was sort of happening in the background. I got pregnant in 2008 and gave birth in September and actually marched in the inaugural parade not knowing I was pregnant yet but I was. And then gave birth September 14th of 2009. I always laugh about that because I thought about having another child so I could have a couple days off in the hospital. (laughs) So had my maternity leave and towards the end of my maternity leave, I got a call from two mentors of mine in AFA and they encouraged me to run for national office. I said, "oh, okay, well, when is that? Next year?" and they said, "no, it's in four months Sara." So then while I was breastfeeding, I was out running around the country also campaigning to become AFA international vice-president. I was elected. We were in the process of changing our budgeting year to CWA's budgeting year from June to the end of May from what we had been on with the calendar year, which meant that we were also changing our election cycle and all of that. So it was this very weird thing where we had an election and then we had an eight-month transition period. During that time, I sort of buttoned up what I had been doing with the United chapter of AFA and started to transition over the fall before I would become the international vice-president on January 1st.

**Sara** [01:32:00] November first of that year is when we had the Delta election. So I had not directly worked on the campaign but I was there that day and I was at the National Mediation Board when we got those results. And it was horrific. We got the exact number of votes that we had confirmed in the election, which is statistically impossible. I don't actually believe those election results. But we had confirmed 49.5% of the workers having voted for the union. And in the two prior elections, we had gotten anywhere between 1500 and 2000 votes that we couldn't confirm because there was so much fear spread at Delta. So we thought when we got to 49.5% there was no way we could lose.

And I was there to see Northwest flight attendants lose their contract and lose everything. And the Delta flight attendants who had been working so hard to try to gain their union, not achieve that. Then it was not long after that that -- actually the United Airlines/Continental merger had already been announced. I was put in charge of running our representation election there. It was the first thing that I did. With the exception, on the very first day I was in office, the president and I went to Phoenix to try to close out US Airways/America West merger negotiations. And we were off to the races and we had the election for United on June 29th of 2011. So just six months into my term and I didn't sleep. I remember I'd have weekly meetings with Larry Cohen, (laughs) and I remember him yelling at me in one of the meetings saying, "this is going to define your whole life, Nelson. If you don't win this, you're gonna look back and you're going to think nothing of yourself. Nothing." Anyway, I remember it being very intense and I did not sleep at all, but I was essentially running three different jobs. In the morning, I would do the organizing, checking in with all the locations, checking in on their numbers, checking in with them on what the plan was for organizing that day. And then I would do all the external communications and internal communications for the union. And then at night, I would stay up doing social media as long as I could until I fell asleep and was mostly sleeping about two hours a night.

**Sara** [01:34:43] But we won that election. And then it was very difficult because at the time the Machinists filed charges against us. It would be normally something that a company would do. But another union did it and so kept the election results sort of hanging in the balance, kept people from fully committing to the fact that they're in a new union and being able to negotiate with United Airlines over the merger terms. So there was a lot going on there. And we had a lot of conflict in the union after that. We had lost Northwest. So now we had gained Continental, but we had lost Northwest. There was all this turmoil. And then shortly after that, the US Airways/American merger was announced as well. We had always hoped that the American Airlines flight attendants would join our union. About the same time we left ALPA in a sort of amicable divorce, American Flight Attendants had a decent campaign against the Transport Workers Union and had taken on this identity of being an independent union and that being their strength. And of course, it's tied to women being able to address the issues that we want to address at the table. So it was all about beating back the sexism that existed in the labor movement too. But the consultants who worked with them had been able to put in million dollar invoices every year and so they didn't want this independent union to merge with AFA ever. So even though we had had all these times when it was a very obvious fit, there was an effort to keep AFA from merging with APFA because they were afraid they were going to lose their invoices. So they would always make AFA the villain, not the company. So we had another fight on our hands with the US Airways and American merger. I ran for president because our president decided not to fight that and our leadership wanted us to fight it and the US Airways members wanted us to fight for them. So that's what was hanging in the balance.

**Sara** [01:37:06] And what was also hanging in the balance was negotiations at United that had been dragging on forever and not gotten to a conclusion. And now the CEO at United at the time was trying to get rid of the union for sure. They were actually furloughing on the United side and hiring on the Continental side. It was just a horrific condition. So all of these things were happening right around that election and people encouraged me once again to run. Every single office I've ever ran for in AFA it's been someone else's idea, not mine. It ultimately becomes my decision but it usually wasn't my idea. And in the context of all of that is when I ran for president and it was a real contested election. Ultimately, at the end of the day, I got two thirds of the vote, but I had a union to put back together as president because there was a lot of infighting and a lot of dissension. One of the first things that I had to do, even though we made the deal better for US airways flight attendants, we had already lost the representation of the US Airways flight attendants by the time I became president. So we had another year where we were negotiating with APFA to preserve their

US Airways seniority and preserve their bargaining rights. But we had to give up representation. And so the first thing I had to do as president was cut 20% of our staff because we were losing 20% of our revenue once again.

**Jeff** [01:38:46] We're coming up on two hours so I want to get just a couple of quick questions before we let you go. What do you see as the biggest challenges that you've got facing you right now as the president of AFA?

**Sara** [01:39:00] I think that what we have been able to do in recent years and especially since the MeToo movement and also the stance that we took in the government shutdown in 2019, it really propelled the public's view of a flight attendant in a very different way. And we ran a campaign as aviation's first responders and really worked at changing the view of flight attendants so that we could change. We already knew our value. Now we could change our value at the bargaining table. So we were ready to go into negotiations in 2020 with all of this at our backs. And then, Covid hit. Because we had been through a crisis before, we were not going to go through that again. I remember, March 5th was the day that Elizabeth Warren dropped out of the presidential race. She was the last woman standing. I had worked very closely with her policy people during the course of the campaign. I knew all of them were looking for jobs and they were in dire straits because here we were we had this crisis now that there were not going to be jobs for anyone anywhere. So we worked with four of them. We put together a plan in the course of four hours that I sent over to chairman [Peter] DeFazio, the chairman of the Transportation Infrastructure Committee in the House. That was a Friday. By Sunday, he called me and said, Pelosi has accepted this as the foundation of the Democratic platform for the aviation industry. Then [Senate Majority Leader] Mitch McConnell tried to hijack the process and put together a bill that was a big giveaway to corporations. So, just five days later, I got a call from Senator [Edward] Markey who said, "Sara, you're going to be so proud. Every Democrat is standing together and we have denied Mitch McConnell the ability to move forward with this plan." I give credit to Nancy Pelosi too, because she came screeching across the country and ran into that Senate caucus room and told them what they needed to do. Then we had a fighting chance. In the meantime what had happened was that the CEOs were not getting anywhere with their efforts to try to get relief because everybody was mad at the airlines after all this consolidation, the additional fees, the fact that you could see inequality when you walked on an airplane. So what people were experiencing in their own lives, they were seeing and experiencing visually when they would walk onto an airplane as they'd go back to the back seat where maybe you're lucky if you can get your butt in there, but you don't get to bring your bag unless you pay another 50 bucks. So they were not getting a warm reception. And, Doug Parker, who was CEO of American, who I had negotiated with in various different roles over a period of 20 years, called because chairman DeFazio told them, I'm not going to talk to you until you talk to labor. And they said, "well, what do you mean? We need to call Rich Trumka?" And DeFazio said, "no, you need to call Sara Nelson." It took him another two days of failing on the Hill before they made that call. But Doug Parker did make that call and on March 18th of 2020, I went down to the Airlines for America boardroom, where there were six CEOs sitting around the table and several staff behind them. I told them, yeah, you're not going to get anything, the public hates you for good reason. But we've got this plan that will save jobs. It'll save the industry. You're going to have to agree to ban stock buybacks and cap your own pay. Oh, and by the way, we want seats on your boards and you can't change any contracts in bankruptcy. We did not come to an agreement on those two terms or on the term that they couldn't spend any of the money on union busting. But we came to an agreement that night on the core terms that this would be payroll support that was essentially a pass-through to the workers to stay in our jobs. No furloughs and no pay cuts also was another important point. And they had to cap their pay and ban stock buybacks and dividends. So that was the agreement. We fought out the other provisions in the legislative process that took place over the next five days only. This was the CARES Act, probably one of the fastest pieces of

legislation ever moving. In a \$2 trillion deal, we were 25 billion and the last item on the table at six in the morning, after McConnell and Schumer had already announced at 1:00 am that they had a deal.

**Sara** [01:43:58] So we got that through and then we were able to fight to get it passed another two times. The second time was while [Donald] Trump was still president and we had the presidential election and all kinds of things that got in the way of that. And when we got it done in December, we still had to have the president sign it. He was out on the golf course, and just the amount of craziness around this, after all of the work that flight attendants had done, going out in Covid, protesting at Senate district offices everywhere to try to get support. And now we had to count on [Senator] Lindsey Graham and Speaker Kevin McCarthy convincing Trump that he should sign this piece of legislation. And basically, at the end of the day, told him you should sign it because the people all across America are going to get \$600 checks with your name on them. And so we got that through a second time and then [Joe] Biden became president and it took one phone call to the Biden administration to get it extended to the point that airlines said “there will not be any furloughs, we're through Covid, we're through the threat and we're moving on.”

**Debbie/Jeff** [01:45:07] What an accomplishment. That's dramatic. If nothing else in your careers, that little vignette is an amazing piece of work. So congratulations. So one of the things we've done with these histories, these interviews is -- Hannah is not a CWA member and she listens to all of these and we give her an opportunity to ask a question as well, just because she's going to ask something that we wouldn't think of because she comes from a different place altogether, not to mention being generations younger. So Hannah, have you got something you want to ask Sara?

**Hannah** [01:45:49] I have a few small questions and then larger questions. First, you mentioned you have a child, a son. Do you have other children?

**Sara** [01:45:57] No, just one kiddo. Just one kiddo.

**Hannah** [01:46:00] And were you ever married?

**Sara** [01:46:02] Yes. Actually, we got married in the middle of the Northwest bankruptcy fight. We got married in Charlottesville [Virginia]. My husband was the general counsel of AFA at the time. And we had known each other for ten years earlier. It wasn't until the middle of the United bankruptcy I lost my dad. He lost his dad too. We were grieving within months of each other. And even though we had worked together for many years at that point and long hours together, we had our first personal conversation after both of us coming back from those memorials and those events. So we sort of secretly dated at the end of the United Airlines bankruptcy. In fact, I know the day that I fell in love with him. We were in the bankruptcy court and it was the day that the PBGC [Pension Benefit Guaranty Corporation] announced that they were taking the airline's side and that our plan to save our pensions was not going to move forward. And he, as an attorney, got the word first and I saw him very upset, walk down the hall, and I ran after him and touched him on the arm and he turned around. He's a strong German guy, raised in Ohio. I had not really ever seen emotion from him before. But he had a tear rolling down his face and, pardon me for the language, but he said, “they stole our fucking pensions.” And the fact that he said “our.” That was it for me.

**Hannah** [01:47:58] He's a keeper.

**Sara** [01:48:00] Yeah. Yeah.

**Hannah** [01:48:02] So my other small questions. Can you just confirm? You said your parents were Christian was it Scientist? Okay. Yes. Christian scientists. This is a very small question, but I'm curious. Do you remember any of the makeup items they forced you to buy?

**Sara** [01:48:25] Yeah. I know for a fact they made me buy lip liner and eyeliner and then a little foundation. And the reason that I really remember the lip liner and the eyeliner was because one of my trips with these two women who were perfectly coiffed at four in the morning after a very short night. I valued my sleep much more, so I thought, I'll do my makeup on the bus. But they didn't want to turn the lights on. And here I was the junior person asking to turn the lights on. That wasn't going to happen. So I did my makeup in the bus with the lights out, and I mixed up the lip liner and the eyeliner, and I had red eyes and black lips. And so when we got out of the van, I said, where do you want me to work? And they said, "honey, we'll set up today. Why don't you go to the powder room?"

**Jeff** [01:49:19] Kudos for them not saying the circus.

**Sara** [01:49:23] Exactly. Exactly. So. I remember for sure that's what I was required to buy.

**Hannah** [01:49:30] Thank you. I guess I'll ask one more question, which is that you mentioned the MeToo movement and that changing the public's perception of flight attendants. Could you speak a little more about that?

**Sara** [01:49:45] Yeah. My first day on the job a flight attendant pulled me aside after a conflict in the office about how we were going to work. I was a reserve. So here I was being called out to work a trip last minute because another flight attendant had called in sick. It was a very senior trip, so I was working with these two 35-year flight attendants in 1996. They had been through it. We also were the first group to beat smoking out of our workplace. We beat Big Tobacco, even over the objections of ALPA. The pilots wanted to continue to be able to smoke on the plane. She had a very raspy voice because she had spent all those years with second-hand smoke. And she pulled me aside to try to explain what had just happened. And she said, "Listen, management thinks of us as their wives or their mistresses, and in either case, they hold us in contempt." I'm like, woo, that's a lot at 23 fresh out of company training. And then she said, "your only place of worth is with your fellow flying partners and if we stick together, you wear your union pin, there's nothing we can't accomplish." I was attracted to the message of solidarity. But I thought about that conversation when the MeToo movement broke. Because here I was, president of this union, the union that had been the little union that can, that takes on anything if it's in our way. But we never expected anyone to open the door for us. We never expected. The pilots and the Machinists when we went through the employee stock ownership plan, which we ultimately were not a part of, because at the 11th hour, they said they didn't want us to have a board seat because a woman should not be on the board. This is what we had fought through. And so when the MeToo movement broke, I thought about all of the sexual harassment that I had faced on the job. And I thought, well, I got to make sure that my experience is not just mine alone, because we didn't even talk about it. It's just like it's what we lived with every single day. I said to our communications staff, "watch out, the phone's going to start ringing." And they're like, "what do you mean? I said, they're going to start telling stories of people who face sexual harassment at work. How long do you think it's going to take them before they call the flight attendant union?" So, I got out into the crew rooms and I was having conversations with flight attendants, and I said, what do you experience? Do you experience this? And we actually did do an official survey that determined that two-thirds of our members had experienced sexual harassment in just the year prior. 1 in 5 had experienced physical harassment of some kind in the prior year. But to a T in this crew room, whether the flight attendant had been there for a couple months or 30 years, they said, yeah, this is like part of our daily occurrence. And I



said, okay, what do you do when it happens? Their first answer would be, oh, we tell them to stop. And I'm like that every time? And then the real conversation would start and they would say, no, we don't have time. We got to keep moving. We have to de-escalate. If I do that it might create a bigger problem. And I would say, do you report it to anyone? Like report it to who? Like, "who's going to care?" And so then the answer would come. This is just part of the job. That was kind of painful, actually, to realize here I was president of the union with all of these people who were experiencing this every single day, and then also having experienced it myself, the way that flight attendant had described it to me, having experienced it at the table, that contempt. It was pretty painful, and I realized that we have got to change the perception of who we are. We've got to tell the story. We have to make it not okay. And luckily, right at the same time, The Washington Post reached out and said we'd like you to write an op-ed about what is the one thing that the airlines could do immediately to change the situation? And so I wrote an op-ed saying that, and also sent letters to all the CEOs at the same time saying "you need to immediately denounce this industry's sexist past. You need to hold up flight attendants as safety professionals, and you need to announce that there is a zero tolerance policy at the airline for this kind of behavior for employees or passengers." At the time, we finally got that contract done at United to bring United and Continental together. The CEO respected me and he responded and did it right away. That started to change everything because when the CEO did that, especially when we had to count on the pilots to report these things to the ground, he just told the pilots that this is a priority. You have to do this which completely changed our relationship with the flight deck. It changed our relationship with the public. It changed our relationship to each other about how we would be very clear in supporting each other and talking about this and not accepting this kind of treatment, which I think was also a really important basis going into Covid and all that flight attendants dealt with on the planes. It changed the discussion around our jobs and I think around jobs that had been traditionally held by women in general. So we took that moment and really used it. And then actually, what happened, our work around that led to me getting the Drum Major for Justice Award from the AFL-CIO, which happened to have its celebratory dinner and awards night on day 30 of the government shutdown, which was the place where I gave the speech about calling on the entire labor movement to conduct a general strike in order to end the shutdown, and talked about the power of working people, how we had to stand up for each other, which then also led The New York Times to say that I was the most powerful flight attendant in the country, which at the time I hated because I still was going to the place that I thought that people thought about flight attendants. So I thought they were making fun of us. But then I realized it says flight attendants and power on the front page of the Sunday business section of The New York Times and on page four, there was a profile of the Delta Air Lines CEO. So, I think all of that puts us in a position to demand our full worth. And I looked forward to going into that bargaining. But we've got to make it stick now that we finally have the chance to address issues that we haven't been able to address in 20 years.

**Jeff** [01:57:14] Sara. This has been incredible.