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Interview with Joan Greenbaum
Interviewed by Irwin Yellowitz

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Irwin Yellowitz: Today is Thursday, May 16, 2019. I'm Irwin Yellowitz and I will be interviewing Joan Greenbaum about her years of activity in the PSC and her years at LaGuardia Community College. So hello, Joan. And let's begin.

Joan Greenbaum: Okay, Irwin.

Irwin: Why don't we begin with the usual background question? Tell us something about your family background and your educational background.

Joan: Well, I'll tell you that I think I had landed in heaven when I came to LaGuardia in 1973, the beginning of the first full class. And I didn't have a PhD at that point. In fact, I came from a family of immigrants that didn't choose for me to go to college and didn't believe a woman should do that. I did manage to get a bachelor's and after I got to LaGuardia I started working on my doctorate.

Irwin: Where was your bachelor's degree?

Joan: Penn State.

Irwin: And your doctorate you eventually earned?

Joan: Yeah. Two parts. One part was the course work, is at the New School – in political economy. New School had a fabulous economics department, really great. And then I had a grant from the Institute for Policy Studies in Washington. Stanley Aronowitz did it too. We did it together. He wrote about science and I wrote about technology from a political economy perspective.

Irwin: Okay. And you chose to come into CUNY. As you say, you thought you'd landed in heaven. How did that trip to heaven materialize?

Joan: Oh, it materialized luckily. I was recruited to LaGuardia by two people I had worked with before. One was Herman Washington and I'd worked with him at IBM when I had gotten a job as a computer programmer. And [I also worked] with Dori Williams. Herman was in the then data processing department with Donald Davidson, and Dori Williams was in the cooperative ED department. And those two things combined with liberal arts really drew me because we were a one-college concept.

We weren't really divided into separate disciplines and we were co-teaching and we were involved in all kinds of collaborative learning environments. It was very, very exciting.

Irwin: And it was a fairly new college.

Joan: It was practically brand new. Joe Shenker was a 29-year-old president. Well, he was 29, I think, when he was appointed.

Irwin: Yes. [He was] a lifetime community college president.

Joan: Yes.

Irwin: He then went, I believe, to Westchester. Didn't he –

Joan: No.

Irwin: That was a different person?

Joan: No. He went to Bank Street.

Irwin: When did you join the PSC? And were you active from the very beginning or did that come later?

Joan: I joined when I got the job. It was my first chance to be in the union. I remember at IBM that my supervisor had told me that if two people asked for the same thing, a demand, he should either pass it up the chain of command or give in to it because they didn't want a union. So –

Irwin: And [they] still don't have one as far as I know.

Joan: Correct. But I have been involved with *Computer People for Peace* and our group having not brought about peace with other groups became involved in trying to start a union for computer workers. We didn't succeed at that. But it was an interesting time in the early '70s. So I knew I wanted to be part of a union.

Irwin: And were you active in the PSC at that time?

Joan: Not particularly – on the local campus, yes. Don Davidson was the chairperson and we had union issues within the college. And we would discuss them. But it wasn't – well, since we were new and were forming our own governance, and we were forming our own practices and principles, we didn't pay much attention to the central PSC.

Irwin: Yes, I can understand that. I think that was fairly common actually in the very beginning.

Joan: Interesting.

Irwin: In the '70s, there's a lot more emphasis on campus activity than later. Later the central union became more important. Okay, so you were not particularly active, but then the opposition to the Polishook caucus developed. It was called New Directions.

Joan: That's right.

Irwin: And its first manifestation was at LaGuardia.

Joan: That's right. That what –

Irwin: With John Hyland in 1990 or '91. Were you part of that? And if so, what?

Joan: Yes, I was part of that. But I should go back a little bit. One was in the late '70s, a group of us were part of this – I'm sorry, not the late '70s. When the *Big Mac* and the end of both Open Admissions and free tuition came about, we were part of a coalition not to use union funds to shore up the New York City's treasury. So we were kind of an opposition group then. And that's '76. '75, '76.

Irwin: So you were opposed to the buyout by the pension systems to help New York City.

Joan: Yes. And there were a number of us, particularly from Brooklyn College, who were involved in that – because I was living in Brooklyn at the time. Nancy Romer was one.

Irwin: Okay. And what was the argument that you put forward to not using pension fund money to –

Joan: Well, that this was the beginning of what became known as austerity and that giving in to this argument when the funds hadn't really been looked at. Was New York really bankrupt? What could be done, what else could be done? Why did it have to be off our backs?

Irwin: Okay.

Joan: And I was just about finished with my PhD at that time. So it all fit together.

Irwin: PSC was not a leading force in that rescue effort. It came primarily from the UFT [United Federation of Teachers].

Joan: That is correct.

Irwin: But I guess we went along with it and you objected to that.

Joan: Yes.

Irwin: Okay.

Joan: But we were a broad range coalition.

Irwin: Oh. So it went beyond CUNY?

Joan: Yes, it went beyond CUNY. But I just remember the CUNY people. And many of the CUNY people that we were engaged with them in the '70s. We got back together again in the end of the '80s and the beginning of the '90s.

Irwin: Okay, so –

Joan: So there's not an accident here. History is full of these little rocky roads.

Irwin: Is there any particular reason why you came back together around 1990 and not say 1985 or 1980?

Joan: No.

Irwin: In other words, there was a long period there. The Polishook Group was not challenged at all, until this New Directions challenge.

Joan: It's a very good question, Irwin, and I don't know the answer, but I will ponder it. I myself got involved with the union in '86, with the central PSC. Because, well, I had my PhD, and from the same way that Stanley Aronowitz did, he had been appointed at the Graduate Center and I was refused promotion to assistant professor from lecturer.

And I was told by – I remember the name of the person, Richard Rothbart at –

Irwin: Oh yes. He became important in the central administration of CUNY later.

Joan: Yes. And he said that my PhD was not valid.

Irwin: I see.

Joan: And there were three of us that this happened to, all who happened to be women. And the head of personnel at LaGuardia, – Susan Arminger, [was] a wonderful person. And this is in the days when personnel actually worked with the personnel as opposed to human resources that said you didn't do X and you can't.

And Susan said why don't you go down to the union and talk to Arnold –

Irwin: Cantor.

Joan: Cantor. And I went down and talked to Arnold, and Arnold put his feet up and said, well, of course you could be promoted. There's this suit that we just won – well, it wasn't just. It had been won – what was the year of the –

Irwin: Melani, are you referring –

Joan: Melani, yes.

Irwin: That was 1983.

Joan: '83.

Irwin: Yeah.

Joan: But we didn't know about it at LaGuardia.

Irwin: Interesting. Because it was so highly publicized in 1983.

Joan: Well, I don't know. It didn't trickle its way down. But interestingly it reached the personnel director, who knew, and sent me – she couldn't say, oh, we won this suit, you won this suit. She sent me to the union and Arnold said, yeah, of course.

Irwin: And did you get that promotion?

Joan: Oh, I got the promotion, yes.

Irwin: Okay. So now you have been promoted to assistant professor. And we reach 1990.

Joan: No, we're not at 1990.

Irwin: Oh, you're 1980 –

Joan: Six.

Irwin: Six. But if we go back now to the PSC, the formation of New Directions, how did that evolve around 1990? Because when John ran against Don Davidson, it was at that point.

Joan: Right. But I'm going to go back to the '80s because I was active, both on the campus and with the central PSC. And Irwin Polishook was helping on a lot of things. I think he sensed that we were developing something at LaGuardia and I became interested in health and safety issues. And you are aware that at the central PSC there was Ezra –

Irwin: Seltzer.

Joan: Seltzer. And Bob Wurman.

Irwin: Both from college lab technicians.

Joan: College lab technicians. And I asked them to come out and help me around the campus, and so walking around the campus we began to notice things that were not healthy and not safe. And that, I think, was one of the impetuses. Queens had a similar issue. Brooklyn had issues with health and safety also, but they developed later.

So I think that was one of the budding issues, was our work environment was not what we needed to support us for our work.

Irwin: Okay. We're going to get to health and safety later, but since you brought it up, let's ask this question now. What led you into the health and safety work? Was it the conditions at LaGuardia or had you had previous experience?

Joan: There's two parts to that answer, yes. One is it was conditions at LaGuardia. I take working conditions seriously, and if working conditions involve leaks and mold, that's part of our intellectual working conditions. The other is that I knew Dave Kotelchuck back from Computer People for Peace, he was involved with that. And when we folded the tents of Computer People for Peace, he became very active with Science for the People, and we folded our tents into Science for the People.

I recently went back to look at that history and found some documents on it. And so Dave, who was a physicist, is, went back and studied health and safety at Harvard and got a – I guess in addition to his PhD got a Masters in what was the just burgeoning of occupations – health and safety. So I was aware of it from two sources. I was also aware of it later on because I know Tony Mazaki, who was a founder of the field.

Irwin: Dave Kotelchuck taught at Hunter College.

Joan: That's correct.

Irwin: People will know who he is. So now you were involved with the health and safety area and you were working within the union.

Joan: Within the union centrally.

Irwin: Yes. And how did this then feed into the New Directions as an opposing group within the union?

Joan: We felt, well, first of all I should say, John, who you've spoken to. Mike Frank—

Irwin: John Hyland.

Joan: Hyland, yes, I'm sorry. And Mike Frank and I had a lot of discussions about democracy in the union. And Mike's very good, as is John, in going to find sources and reading and histories and — so we had sort of intellectual discussions as well as practical discussion. I can't tell you what was the cutting edge, what made us think that we really had to run an opposition slate. It was very clear by that point that Don Davidson wasn't doing anything active, that we were doing more work on the campus than he was.

And he wasn't open to running with us. And it — I mean from an overarching standpoint it would be local democracy that really interested us and motivated us.

Irwin: You ran that first opposition slate at LaGuardia and you won.

Joan: Yup.

Irwin: What were the issues in that election?

Joan: Well, certainly I remember health and safety, local democracy and working conditions. Because it was becoming the point at LaGuardia where we were no longer a brand new college and that there were rules and regulations beginning to be handed down. And I think it wasn't just LaGuardia. You have a broader framework and I really want to know more about this at some point, that CUNY central was playing a more central role in who could do what.

Irwin: Definitely. That was the movement of power to the chancellor's office; it had been going on for two decades.

Joan: Right. But —

Irwin: It continued.

Joan: And in the '80s it really was so — yeah, the end of the '80s.

Irwin: So we have the New Directions caucus at LaGuardia. And this developed into what was called the New Caucus.

Joan: That's right.

Irwin: In the 1990s, and this New Caucus challenged the existing Polishook caucus, which was called the City University Union Caucus (CUUC). Challenged it at the chapter levels first — and then in 1997 at the general union-wide level. But we'll come to that —

Joan: Okay.

Irwin: But it began at the chapters. Could you explain how New Directions went from being a one-campus opposition to a university-wide opposition with a new name?

Joan: Well, New Caucus wasn't our name but it was their name. So I remember like the rest of life a lot of meetings. We began to find out what was going on at Brooklyn. Queens began to find out what was going on with us and at Brooklyn. There were — we were also attending the DA,

so keep in mind that through the '90s I was a delegate to the DA. I also did lobbying with the union in Albany.

And so we began to find out what issues we were each addressing. A lot of late bar nights, I remember. But that's fairly traditional, isn't it?

Irwin: Does that help organization?

Joan: I don't know. But you could probably look at any union history and find that.

Irwin: I think you could. So the groups had founded, had formed separately at each campus. There was no overarching central –

Joan: I don't remember an overarching central –

Irwin: A central head of this New Caucus. It had come up from these –

Joan: It had come up from the campuses. Do you remember what years? Or do you have a record of what years Brooklyn –

Irwin: Well, I can recall personally that the challenges at the chapters, like Brooklyn City, Queens, the big senior colleges in the main, was probably 1993 to '97 period.

Joan: Right.

Irwin: So that would be roughly the period that this is taking place. Now did a central group develop for the New Caucus? Did it develop a structure beyond the different campus elements?

Joan: Yes, it did. I'm not a good one to ask those questions of.

Irwin: Okay –

Joan: I remember more about discussions than I do about strategic organization.

Irwin: But how were decisions made? Decisions had to be made. Were they still being made at the chapter level? Because at this time they were still, the elections were still being done at the chapter level.

Joan: Right. And then there was a '97 election?

Irwin: Yes, we'll get to that.

Joan: I actually don't remember that. But then I have three sabbaticals in the period from the '80s to the '90s and I was an associate visiting professor in Denmark for three years and a visiting professor in Norway for two years. So not consecutively, I was back at the chapter and then back over there. So '97 I was not here for.

Irwin: Well, we'll get to '97.

Joan: I think.

Irwin: Maybe I'll refresh your memory about that. But between approximately '93 and '97, the New Caucus won a number of the big campuses, one at City College and one at Brooklyn, one at Queens. And this of course is the way an opposition should operate. Not from the top down,

and we'll get to that later, but from the bottom. And by winning these chapter elections it established itself as a substantial opposition.

Do you recall whether, what the issues were, that were raised in those separate chapter elections at the senior colleges?

Joan: No, they were more concerned about what I would think of as status issues because they were more established campuses with long history and more imposition from CUNY Central. I'm not sure when the changeover from Murphy to – who came after Murphy – as chancellor?

Irwin: I am blocking her name.

Joan: Ann Reynolds.

Irwin: Right – lady from California.

Joan: Yes. And that was a big turning point in terms of what happened to us on the campuses. And since we were members of the Delegate Assembly, we felt that Irwin Polishook was not paying attention to these changes on the campuses and that in the DA, and you may remember some of this –

Irwin: Yes, I was there too.

Joan: There were issues raised from the campuses, not just our campuses, that seemed not – he didn't seem to be aware of nor particularly concerned with, at least it appeared that way. There also were, and this was significant for LaGuardia, HEO, Higher Education Officer, issues. And the HEO chapter was really beginning to be stepped on in terms of its working conditions. And that wasn't being addressed at the PSC central office.

Irwin: Do you recall the austerity budgets of that time?

Joan: I certainly do, yes. No hiring and –

Irwin: I think that was a major factor in this whole discussion of the 1990s within the union but obviously the university was being squeezed by a series of very bad budgets from Albany.

Joan: As we are now.

Irwin: Yes.

Joan: But then the question is, what do you do about it? So we felt, certainly I can speak for my own campus, that not enough was being done in terms of lobbying Albany. And again, this blanket of austerity was a cover for what's really going on and what do we need. And we felt all along that, I mean my perspective, LaGuardia was an engine of growth for new immigrants coming into this country, and like my father, you know, they could benefit from an education and it would be the right thing to do and we weren't able to assist them.

I mean increasingly at LaGuardia, for example, counseling services were cut. Well, one of the worst things to cut is counseling services for students.

Irwin: Despite these conditions, the New Caucus did not do that well in the community colleges. It did much better in the larger senior colleges.

Joan: Didn't it do well at BMCC? I thought BMCC had a chapter.

Irwin: Yes. LaGuardia was the first, of course. But its major victories at this time, this time, were in the large senior colleges. And not at the community colleges. And when we get to 1997, we'll see how that plays out.

Joan: See, that's where my memory leaves me.

Irwin: All right, let's move – the New Caucus then was in opposition, a very active one. It had members of the Delegate Assembly, as you were the first. But there were many others who came from the chapters as they won them. So it was a very lively debate that took place in the Delegate Assembly. And now we come to 1997. This is the first time that the New Caucus challenges the general union, central union, in an election. Steve London headed the New Caucus slate and ran against Irwin Polishook in that election. Now you say you may have been away, but do you recall the decision-making process in the New Caucus that led, first to the decision to run against the central union leadership, and second to choose Steve London, who was the Brooklyn College chapter chair, to be the candidate.

Joan: No, I don't remember it. So I was away. And I would like to hear about it and–

Irwin: Well, that was a very important decision because in that election Irwin won 2-1. And this did not stop the New Caucus from continuing to organize at the chapter levels, which was successful after that. But to me, as a labor historian, it was not at all surprising because labor union members tend to be very protective of their leadership. And they do not change the leadership of a union that's well known, as Irwin was, for 20 years, very lightly.

So even if they change on a chapter level, they left the central administration in place, the central union in place. Okay, so it was a 2-1 defeat, but the New Caucus continued to organize on the chapter level. Now do you recall whether that defeat changed the decision-making process within the caucus as to how to proceed from that point on?

Joan: No, I don't recall. But I don't remember being dispirited in any way. I mean from what you say about labor unions and labor history; it's not surprising that we lost. And by the time we got to '99, wasn't it '99?

Irwin: Well, the next election in 2000.

Joan: Yes, 2000. We were in high spirits and we had more campuses.

Irwin: Yes, you had continued to organize at the grass roots, at the chapter level. And when we come to 2000, again the New Caucus challenges on the central union level, but of course there's a big change.

Joan: Yes.

Irwin: Irwin Polishook retires. So he is no longer there. And therefore the dynamic of supporting your well-established union leader is no longer there either. And instead it's an open seat essentially, because Richard Boris, who had succeeded Irwin, had only been in office for a few months. But the candidate of the New Caucus changes. It is no longer Steve London. It becomes Barbara Bowen.

Now could you comment about why that took place?

Joan: Yes. I ran Barbara. My colleagues at LaGuardia were behind Steve. There was a group, a small group of us who favored Barbara. But we made inroads. Nancy Romer. Susan O'Malley and I ended up doing the literature for the campaign. For me there was no question in my mind that Barbara was a strategic thinker, that she had broad range planning powers. And that

Steve is the best detail planner I've ever known. He's broadened out but he – the best. And I thought that the position needed broad range thinking and that, detailed, should follow.

Irwin: They were both chapter chairs. Steve from Brooklyn and Barbara from Queens. Was there any element of feminism in this decision?

Joan: Oh, absolutely. Sure. Sure. I mean had Barbara been a different kind of person, I wouldn't have backed her for just being a woman. But she was also a feminist and had that wonderful combination of broad range thinking and the ability to get things done. Of course, we could see that at Queens [College].

Irwin: Was there a contest within the New Caucus to decide on who would be the –

Joan: Yes, there was.

Irwin: The candidate.

Joan: Yeah, I remember the final meeting, the big meeting on that. I was very busy counting votes. And standing on the side holding my breath, yes.

Irwin: How was that decision made? First of all, how were the people who came to that meeting chosen?

Joan: No. They could be New Caucus members.

Irwin: Any New Caucus member.

Joan: Any New Caucus member and you just joined the New Caucus and could come.

Irwin: So there were no delegates or –

Joan: No delegates, no.

Irwin: So then you had how many people that were present at that meeting?

Joan: I remember that had to be counted too because was somebody actually a member? Were they checked off? We filled an auditorium. And I'm trying to remember the auditorium.

Irwin: So we're talking about hundreds.

Joan: More than 100, for sure, [fewer] than 300 probably. The number 180 comes to my mind. But who knows, [do] you know? That's –

Irwin: Well, that's a very good number.

Joan: Yeah.

Irwin: For a caucus meeting. Was there a campaign by Steve and Barbara to try to win the candidacy?

Joan: Yeah, no. That's a good question because we had to be doing more than just talking amongst ourselves, but I don't remember it. I don't remember until actually writing the literature for the central election what we did for our campaign. I'm pretty sure we had leaflets.

Irwin: That you had distributed prior to the –

Joan: Yeah, yeah. And it wasn't known how it would go.

Irwin: And was it a close vote in the end?

Joan: Barbara won well. But I don't remember the numbers.

Irwin: And when she was the winner, the candidate, Steve, supported her.

Joan: Yes, he did, yup.

Irwin: I think he ran as the First Vice President.

Joan: He was First Vice President and it was terrific.

Irwin: We come to the election and Barbara is now running against Richard Boris, who was equally unknown to the entire community, because neither one of them has held a central office position, although Richard had been vice president under Irwin Polishook in the last term. But being a vice president under Irwin didn't give you much visibility.

Joan: No, it didn't. And I'm trying to think of who was his vice president before that.

Irwin: Howard Jones.

Joan: Oh, Howard. Okay.

Irwin: Yes, from the Borough of Manhattan Community College. So it was an open seat. And the final vote total was 52 percent approximately for Barbara and 48 percent for Richard Boris. Did that surprise you? Did you remember thinking that this was going to be a bigger margin, or were you happy with the margin?

Joan: Well, first of all, I arranged a place where we could get together over the – after the vote counting. And we had a big group of us. Well, actually I don't know how many. Probably about 20 of us got together at the Triple A (American Arbitration Association) for the vote counting. And we had been told by people who had run elections before that 1/3 of the vote no matter what is always going to go for the incumbent. So don't get your socks all knocked off that this is what's going to happen. And that it'll [be] probably be fairly close.

So I remember being elated, and I think we were all elated.

Irwin: Well, you certainly should have been because after all this other caucus, the Polishook caucus had been in control [of] the union since Belle Zeller's time. So we're talking about close to 30 years. And so to win, even though it was open seat, was an accomplishment. Richard Boris was still running as the head of that well-established caucus. So yes, I wouldn't be surprised at that margin. But –

Joan: I remember being at the union office, the central office, shortly after that. And Irwin took me aside. He was I guess packing.

Irwin: Yes. He had retired about two months prior to the election.

Joan: Yeah, and he said 'I shouldn't have run Richard, should I have?' I said 'no, you shouldn't have, but I'm glad you did.'

Irwin: Well, he had wanted to retire actually for some time. And this was the very last moment that he could do it. He was determined not to run again and serve another term. That was out of

the question. So the only question was whether he would retire earlier. After winning in '97 he felt he owed his constituency some more time as president. Otherwise why would he have run at all?

At the same time, he was not going to run again, so he stepped down before the 2000 election. Now the New Caucus had won the offices and won most of them. Unlike the situation back in the 1970s when there was a great minority group, that was not the case in 2000. The New Caucus won almost all of the seats on the Executive Council and a great majority in the Delegate Assembly. Not all. There were a few chapters –

Joan: Kingsborough.

Irwin: Yes, Kingsborough and Lehman. There were a few. I think there may have been a few others that were not part of the New Caucus. But the New Caucus was now firmly in control of the union. Did this make a difference in the way the union operated in your view?

Joan: Oh yes. I mean from the very simple thing like lots of people came into the union office to work. We replaced typewriters with computers. All four of the main officers were there all the time. Dave Kotelchuck and I became health and safety coordinators. I was there one or two days a week. There were grievance counselors, there were organizers hired, with a very, very good central Director of Organizing, Maryann Carlisi. This was from what was really a dead office. I mean I had spent time at the central office. You had, I assume. There wasn't much going on.

Irwin: So it revitalized the central office.

Joan: Yes. And Cecelia McCall took over as Secretary and made it her job to look at and act in political organizing.

Irwin: So the lobbying function improved.

Joan: Immensely. Yeah.

Irwin: In the years that followed, there was occasional opposition. In 2006, there was an opposition slate headed by the head of the Kingsborough chapter, Rina Yarmish. And in 2009 there was an opposition slate headed by someone from City College whose name escapes me at the moment. Do you remember his name?

Joan: Yes. No. It's at the tip of my – it might come later.

Interviewer Note: The candidate in 2009 was Fred Brodzinski.

Irwin: The thing that struck me about these two efforts was that they were just the opposite from the New Caucus. The New Caucus had organized from the bottom, had won chapter elections first and then challenged at the central office level. These challenges were strictly at the central level with no basis in the chapters.

Joan: Rina Yarmish, however, did a fairly respectable vote in 2006.

Irwin: I was surprised by that.

Joan: Yes, I was going to – that's the question I was going to ask you. How did she do so well, considering that the New Caucus had now six years of experience, so they were not novices – And that her organizing technique was deficient in that she had no organization underneath her?

Irwin: No. Her margin was just about the same. I think Barbara had 54 percent in that election and Rina Yarmish had 46. So it was a little different from 2000. But can you explain anything about that election, the 2006 election?

Joan: No. I mean the thought at the time, I thought she must have known a lot of people on a lot of campuses who were talking or giving leaflets out for her. There certainly were nasty attacks against us. It would be disappointing to think that those nasty attacks are what increased her vote. But a dirty campaign sometimes does that. So –

Irwin: She came from a small community college and did not have an organization.

Joan: That's right.

Irwin: So it always has struck me as rather strange that she did that well, considering that in 2003 there had been no opposition candidate and in 2009, Barbara defeated the opponent very easily. So I guess my general question is, we're now at 2019. There's been no challenge since 2009. This is similar to Irwin Polishook's day, where he went many years without a challenge. Why is that? Why do you think that no opposition group has surfaced in the PSC, really since 2000?

Because as we've said, these two elections were really organized just for the election. They were not – there's been, there was nothing equivalent to the New Caucus that has come up since 2000.

Joan: I want to come back to 2006 again and ask you why you thought Rina had done surprisingly well?

Irwin: I don't know. I have always been rather puzzled by that. At the time I thought she ran a very bad campaign. As you say, it was primarily an attack on the New Caucus but that you expect in an election that opponents are going to attack the incumbents. But unlike the New Caucus, she had not organized well. Didn't have a base in the chapters and still did a fairly respectable vote. So, I have always been puzzled by that. That's why I asked you whether you had any insights about it.

Joan: No, just the dirty campaign and the mudslinging. And I'm afraid that's going to go on now too.

Irwin: Go on now in?

Joan: In the next election.

Irwin: You're talking about the national US election?

Joan: Oh, the US election, there's no question.

Irwin: You're talking about the PSC election?

Joan: I'm talking about the PSC election.

Irwin: Well, that's the question. Do you see an opposition? There's been none up till now. Do you see an opposition forming at this point to challenge in the next election?

Joan: No. I mean Rina is from Kingsborough. Kingsborough did run an opposition now and won in this election. And I believe Rina's still chair there, isn't she?

Irwin: Yes, I believe so.

Joan: I asked her how many grandchildren she had. Because for a while we were keeping track of each other's grandchildren. But she's so far beyond any number; she says I don't even count them now.

Irwin: Kingsborough may be the only chapter that has consistently had a leadership that was not New Caucus, since 2000.

Joan: That's right.

Irwin: Some of the others like Lehman switched over.

Joan: Yes.

Irwin: But not Kingsborough. So that may be just –

Joan: Well, they had fusion slates.

Irwin: In Kingsborough.

Joan: Yes. And should have run one this time, I believe. But okay. What do I think will happen? My optimistic self believes, or wants to believe, that there's been a good amount of activity on almost all of the campuses (union activity [and] an awareness of union issues. Certainly in light of the U.S. Supreme Court *Janus* Decision, certainly in light of the last campaign for a contract, certainly in light of an understanding of how difficult it is to get a contract out of an austerity state.

So I think that the base of the union is good and strong and that that will help the overall union.

Irwin: The CUUC (City University Union Caucus), Irwin Polishook's caucus, one reason that it became weaker is it became older.

Joan: Yes.

Irwin: It aged out. Now my impression is that the New Caucus has developed a leadership program to bring in new and younger people on a continuous basis. And if that's the case, that would avoid that problem of aging out. Is that the way you see it too?

Joan: Well, yes, I see it that way but I don't think it's just age because you and I are of a certain age. I think in Polishook's case, it was almost; you know how he would shrug? I thought his leadership in the last years, through the '90s, through the crises of the '90s, was a giant shrug. And that's certainly not the case here. So whatever the age of leadership is, and certainly the leaders are not old, there is no giving up the mantle of what has to be done day in and day out. And the overall view of where do we have to get to from here.

Irwin: So what happened in the CUUC chapters – not that age necessarily leads to indolence, but that people retired. Chapter chairs who had been in office for 20 years retired and left a vacuum. And my feeling is that the New Caucus does not have that situation, that when a chapter chair reaches an age or an officer like Cecelia McCall and John Hyland.

Joan: Step out, yes.

Irwin: There are younger people who are ready to come in and have been prepared to come in.

Joan: And it's expected. Well, just like we're doing in the retiree chapter. Those of us who have been around the block for a few times have to, are encouraged to step off the exec (Executive Committee) and give the position to a new retiree.

Irwin: Yes, that's – well, retiree sometimes age out from –

Joan: Exactly.

Irwin: Because they die or can't continue to do their activities. But for in-service people it's often retirement that does it. And if you don't have a cadre of younger people ready to step in at that point, and you have an active opposition, as was the case in the 1990s, then you're opening the door to your opposition.

Joan: Yup.

Irwin: Okay, so the New Caucus is quite successful. And I don't see an opposition anywhere. But if there is –

Joan: I wouldn't be sure.

Irwin: Excuse me?

Joan: I wouldn't be sure.

Irwin: I was just about to ask you, if I do see any problems, they are in the area of the adjuncts.

Joan: That's correct.

Irwin: And so I'm wondering if that is a potential problem for the New Caucus leadership as we move ahead.

Joan: I don't think it's a problem. I think it's actually a really good challenge. I think taking on 7K for adjuncts is a way to structurally reorganize the union and you may remember that was one of the central issues in the '90s, was the New Caucus fighting for adjuncts being an active part of the union. And it's still essential because unless the adjuncts are paid decent wages, we're all adjuncts. And it's what's happening to the rest of the workforce out there also.

Irwin: Nationwide.

Joan: Well, worldwide.

Irwin: Maybe world.

Joan: But this is actually my field and this is what I study. So –

Irwin: Well, then you know the number, that horrible number that we all know, that only a third of the faculty today in the United States are on tenure track lines. So 2/3 are temporary or adjunct. And this is –

Joan: Or the wanderers, where they pick up their homes and their cars and their suitcases and go to another appointment somewhere.

Irwin: CUNY has not reached that number yet. But I'm afraid it's headed in that direction.

Joan: Well, we have to structurally face it. And that's, I think, what this campaign is about.

Irwin: Well, certainly at the time, in 2000, when the New Caucus came in, one of the first changes they made was to change the adjunct dues structure.

Joan: I remember this, yes.

Irwin: In the Polishook years, adjuncts paid the same dues as full timers. The New Caucus changed it to a percentage, which meant that adjuncts now paid much lower dues because their income was lower. So the number of adjuncts in the union, which had been small –

Joan: Very small.

Irwin: Now became very large. And I'm wondering, what led to that decision – because that was a critical decision?

Joan: That was critical. And we fought for that and we discussed it through the '90s too. I still see it as the basic structural question of equity. That if you have a group that's paid far lower, then everybody can be paid far lower.

Irwin: Okay, and –

Joan: So it's equity and justice, of course.

Irwin: And of course the adjuncts now represent a much stronger force in the union than they did in the Polishook years, when they comprised only a very small percentage of the union membership.

Joan: Well, of course he was concerned with two factors. Three factors really. One, if they really did get involved, they would be too powerful because they would equal or surpass the number of full time faculty. And two, and it was the same issue with HEOs and CLTs, that the union was a faculty union, not a HEO and CLT union. And I don't think he paid enough [attention], I know he didn't pay enough [attention], other than lip service to those groups.

Irwin: Has the New Caucus worried that the adjuncts could take over the union if they organize to do that, which they have not? They have been part of the New Caucus.

Joan: I can't speak on behalf of the New Caucus. I would say I am not concerned. I think within adjuncts, as you know, there's a number of different groups. There are grad assistants who are, to get their – I'm at the Grad Center, so I speak with them on a regular basis, including spending a day yesterday. The grad students who have to, to keep their fellowships, work as adjuncts. Then there are adjuncts who are returning from other jobs.

And then there are people who get stuck in the adjunct ranks because it's very hard to get a full-time job or a tenure track job, and [they] want to be in New York. But even among those adjuncts who get stuck in New York as a permanent adjunct, there're many who are married or in relationships where they do have health insurance or other benefits from other people. So they're not going it alone.

So what actual proportion of adjuncts relies on this for a sole wage? I don't know. Maybe you have some numbers for that.

Irwin: No, I don't. I don't know that either. But I think you're absolutely right in dividing adjuncts up into these various categories, which also affects how they look at the union, how they look at their job, and whether they would unify into one group.

Joan: Right. And I think that the adjuncts who are graduate students are the most angry. It's interesting because I think it's just within the last five years that grad students for their fellowship have to adjunct. That's required. And that brings about a different relationship to the teaching – to adjuncting.

Irwin: It's interesting. I didn't know that it was that recent. But of course it gives the university a pool of cheap labor.

Joan: Total cheap labor, yes.

Irwin: Not that CUNY is alone in that.

Joan: But if we didn't have a union, they would be paid less as they are on other campuses.

Irwin: Absolutely. Graduate students are exploited in some of the best universities in this country. Miserably exploited.

Joan: So I think there will be some opposition. There's the 7K or Strike people, who really want to press the strike. Strikes, as you know, as a labor historian, take a lot of planning and preparation.

Irwin: And are illegal in New York State.

Joan: Illegal in New York State, yes.

Irwin: And I remember this from the 1970s, which was the last time that we took strike votes, and the Taylor Law had just been put into effect, and it's been used most disastrously against smaller unions like the PSC. We think of ourselves as big –

Joan: Well, TWU [Transport Workers Union] lost big.

Irwin: Yes.

Joan: Yes, the small unions.

Irwin: And that was the last one, and the last strike. And they were big, yes, and they were hit very hard. I think Ed Koch was the mayor then. And he played a major role in using the Taylor Law for all of its power. So it's a dangerous thing to strike these days.

Joan: In New York.

Irwin: Let's go back to the health and safety area, which I know you – we've touched on it, but I know it's one of the major interests in your career over many, many years. So you started out in health and safety. You met Dave Kotelchuck. You –

Joan: I knew Dave.

Irwin: You knew him.

Joan: Yes.

Irwin: You were involved in the Polishook years already. And you continued, of course, in the New Caucus years. What were you able to accomplish as a health and safety officer in –

Joan: Well, we set up the watchdogs, because what Ezra had done, and Seltzer was very good from a central union perspective, but we saw health and safety as being a very bottom up activity. Only you know if your ceiling is leaking and only you can connect that with working conditions and living environments and your own health.

So we set about to set up the watchdogs as active groups on each campus. And then brought about many, many, many trainings with the help of, I wanted to say NYCET but that's wrong. It's – they were up here in this building. NYCOSH –

Irwin: NYPIRG?

Joan: Nope.

Irwin: NYCE? No, I guess I don't know which one, which group –

Joan: Well, my gosh, I worked very closely with them. And then as you know, 2001 [9/11 attacks] happened. So I was involved for God knows how many years with just getting BMCC (Borough of Manhattan Community College) cleaned up and the area around there and working with coalitions and residents and seeing that health program set up that's now supposedly running out of money.

Irwin: Now did you use grievances as a method to get the colleges to remedy these problems?

Joan: Grievances is a tricky method to use, with health and safety because a health and safety problem can be way more immediate than the time of a grievance. That's one [reason]. And then two is that arbitration, you don't know what you're going to get and arbitration is not typically used. Health and safety isn't particularly a technical issue, but you need to understand the technical issues to put it in context. So what we did was we set up the watchdogs who would take health and safety issues to their labor management group on their campuses. That was one. And if it didn't get it solved there, we would take it to regular meetings at I want to say 80th Street but the central CUNY.

Irwin: Okay. I know that you were quite effective at City College, which has –

Joan: Well, that was a long struggle.

Irwin: Yes, it was.

Joan: Marshak, yes

Irwin: We had an aging plant, and some of the buildings, even the more recent, the newer ones, were very shoddy in construction. As a matter of fact, you mentioned President Marshak (Robert Marshak). The science building, which was named after him, was one of the worst, one of the newest buildings but one of the worst conditions, and was closed for a while because of health and safety concerns.

Joan: Yup, we closed it.

Irwin: Yes, the union was very active in City College.

Joan: Well, the campus was very good and Mike Green, a scientist, was one of the watchdogs, and in fact it was his office at the corner, the top I believe, of the Marshak Building, where he came in one morning and the wall was missing. The entire panel of wall had fallen off. That's when they finally closed it. They closed it, yes. Management.

Irwin: Right. I know Bronx Community College has had terrible –

Joan: Many terrible, terrible issues. And they've had a range of – not a range but a longstanding revolving door, presidents who paid no attention to it. And it seems like such a simple thing, that if a president really wanted his or her campus to function well, they put in the budget money for capital funds and maintenance.

Irwin: Well, again, it was an aging campus. That had originally been the NYU –

Joan: Uptown, yes.

Irwin: In the Bronx campus, and those buildings were quite old and probably not in good shape –

Joan: Yes, but the newer ones they built were terrible.

Irwin: Oh, the newer ones also.

Joan: Terrible, yeah.

Irwin: Well, so you had plenty to do in health and safety.

Joan: We had endless amounts to do, yes.

Irwin: Who are some of the other people who you worked with over the years who were important? You mentioned Ezra Seltzer and Robert Wurman, (both CLTs), Dave Kotelchuck. Who are some of the other people?

Joan: Well, Jean Grassman has taken over now. But we worked together for a long time. And we worked – Diane Menna from Queens. And oh my goodness, just about any campus that I went to the chapter chair or a local person. I'm sorry. You can blank out the tape because everybody's name comes to mind and I can't think of them right now.

Irwin: That's fine. And this is one area where I think there's been continuity between the Polishook years and the Barbara Bowen years. Health and safety was a concern of the central –

Joan: It was a concern, but the continuity is very different though.

Irwin: In what way?

Joan: Well, because we did it through the watchdogs. We – I don't know if you remember, and if it's in this room, but we have these yellow strips that hang from the ceiling. And they say, “Got Air,” question mark. And the idea is that you don't need a scientist to know if your air quality is good. You look up and if the strip is moving, you've got air coming in.

Bob Wurman used to go up to Albany. One of the greatest lobbyists I've ever met is Bob. He would go up, take pictures of things on campuses and stick these Got Air stickers up. Climb up on a chair, which you should not do, but that's for health reasons. And stick them in the air vents and you can still go back to Albany to various offices and you see them and people look up and say it's not moving. I don't have air.

So you don't need a scientist to know if your working conditions are livable. That was really quite different and we ran in the years that I was centrally here, coming in once a week, we ran a series of I'd say a couple hundred training programs for faculty and staff. It wasn't just a CLT function. It was everybody.

Irwin: And the current head of health and safety, is he a CLT or is he –

Joan: It's Jean Grassman and she's a professor.

Irwin: Oh, Jean – a woman Jean.

Joan: Yes, yes and Jackie Elliot.

Irwin: Because I don't know her, so –

Joan: Health and safety was – industrial health and safety. Tony Mizaki, who fought for the 1970 or '71 law that brought about OSHA under Nixon was about industrial health and safety. So it was factories and chemicals and things like that. But over the last several decades it's broadened out to all kinds of living and working conditions.

Irwin: Now the Melani settlement, you mentioned it earlier and I want to come back to it because it was so important in the life of women in CUNY. And yet you said –

[Recording off/recording on]

Irwin: We were speaking about the Melani settlement, very important in CUNY history, especially its impact on women, but also its impact on men. And yet LaGuardia seems to have avoided –

Joan: And there we were, a union school.

Irwin: So now you know the Melani settlement. Were you involved with it at all, with the fact gathering or –

Joan: No. It was largely the women at Brooklyn.

Irwin: When the settlement was announced in 1983 you were already a faculty member.

Joan: Yes.

Irwin: Did you expect that it would be widely applied without any further –

Joan: I don't remember it. This is the strange –

Irwin: You don't remember it.

Joan: No. And that is a very strange disconnect. My first memory is being told in '86, well of course there's the Melani settlement.

Irwin: Okay. My own feeling about it was that it was not self-enforcing. Even though it was a settlement. And the union had to enforce it and it did but that there were some administrations, which moved more quickly. Others moved more slowly. But there was always the need for the union to follow up and in cases like yours, where people would come and see, nothing has changed.

Joan: But I'll give you a second example from my own history because after '86, when I realized, oh, okay, this applies to all of us. And I began telling people about it. In '88, or '89, a man was hired in my department who was a New York City schoolteacher and he had been an adjunct in the department and he was being hired full time. I was in the computer systems department. Don Davidson had been the chair of that department.

And this man was being hired for more than I was making. He had no PhD. I had a PhD and two books at that time and a lot of publications, plus this visiting professorship. And I was on P and B (Personnel and Budget Committee) and I said, no, no, that's very nice, he's a good guy, but he can't make more than me. If you want to give him this salary, that's fine, you've got to give me that salary. And they said 'what are you talking about?'

So we were able to carry it out in practice after that.

Irwin: Okay, good. All right –

Joan: But when I say in practice, it took exactly what you're talking about. Enforcement. The guys in my department would have had no interest at all.

Irwin: These kind of things are not self enforcing anywhere. And certainly were not in CUNY. So if there had not been a union – well, first of all, there would have been no Melani settlement because the union at the very end, came in at the very end, but it did provide the money for Judith Vladeck to become the legal representative and to get the settlement. But if there had been no union, I don't think the settlement would have ever happened or been enforced.

[Recording off/recording on]

Irwin: We are back on. And I have just a couple more questions for Joan, who's been very generous with her time. In the retirees chapter, you have also been active.

Joan: You bet.

Irwin: And why is this important to you and why did you choose to continue your activity once you retired?

Joan: Well, actually, once I retired, I still worked at health and safety. I didn't come into the retirees' chapter until I guess about six years after I retired. Because health and safety was keeping me very busy. And the retirees' chapter is a marvelous group of people. And I love the way decisions are made. They're made by consensus. It works very well. I think we're a model of what a chapter is and can be and will do. So I enjoy it.

Irwin: A model of what retirees can do inside a union.

Joan: Yes.

Irwin: Because we are very active throughout the PSC, and that's not true of all teachers unions.

Joan: Oh no.

Irwin: Many of them, the retirees disappear completely as soon as they retire.

Joan: Or occasionally have a luncheon.

Irwin: Yes, something like that. You've also been editor of Turning the Page, as it now known.

Joan: Yes.

Irwin: Was the Retirees Chapter newsletter. What led you to that and how satisfying has that been for you?

Joan: I think you encouraged me.

Irwin: I may have.

Joan: It's a lot of hard work although, Bill Friedheim, does these great graphics for it. And we now have an editorial collective that makes it much easier to think about articles and to solicit articles. But I think it helps bring in more and more people to the chapter meetings and it's getting good comments from people. What do you think?

Irwin: I think it's a splendid newsletter. It's – it covers the news of the chapter, the activities that are, have taken place or will take place. But it also has other articles of interest. You've added book reviews; you've added reflections of retirees. So I think you have brought in a number of interesting features that were not there before which make the newsletter more interesting for people. And it gets out every month. It's wonderful.

Joan: It gets out every month with a lot of sweat, yes.

Irwin: Well, do you have anything you want to add that I haven't covered with you?

Joan: No. No. Very thorough.

Irwin: Okay, good. Well, I want to thank you on behalf of the PSC Archives Committee, which sponsors these interviews. I want to thank you for giving of your time so generously. Thank you, Joan.

Joan: Thank you, Irwin.

[End of recorded material 01:13:15]