

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

OEA – Union History Project

Association of Professional Administrative Staff Project
O.H. 2212

Sally Kenny

Interviewed

by

Heidi L. Scott

on

February 2, 2005

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

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INTERVIEWEE: SALLY KENNEY

INTERVIEWER: Heidi L. Scott

SUBJECT: Association of Professional Administrative Staff

DATE: February 2, 2005

S: This is an interview with Sally Kenney for the Ohio Education Association Union History Project done by Heidi Scott at YSU in Cushwa Hall with Media Services on February 2, 2005 at approximately 8:30 AM.

S: Good morning.

K: Good morning.

S: Before we discuss your involvement with the union, we first want to get a little bit of background information. Could you tell me where and when were you born?

K: I was born here in Youngstown, Ohio in 1950. I'm a baby boomer.

S: Have you lived here your whole life?

K: Yes I have.

S: What was your childhood like?

K: My childhood was a typical childhood of a middle-class baby boomer growing up in the 1950s and 1960s. It was wonderful.

S: What did your parents do for a living?

K: My father worked at what was, when he worked there, it was called United Engineering. It became Wean United, and he was a licensed boiler operator. My mother was a nurse in a doctor's office, but she didn't go to work until my brother went to college when they needed the second income. So she was a stay at home mom and my dad worked 8 to 4 everyday in the mill, and came home when the whistle blew. He did work a swing shift too every once in awhile because I remember going down and picking him up at midnight sometimes when I needed to use the car for something when I was in high school.

S: What's your family like?

K: One brother, two years older than me. He also went to college and he's a schoolteacher today.

S: Is he in this area as well?

K: Yes he is. He lives in Poland.

S: Could you describe your educational background for me?

K: Yes, I have a Bachelor's Degree in Education from YSU. When I graduated I got a teaching job in Austintown and I taught for three years, and still am of the old school where when you have children you stay home. So I quit when I had my children and I was out of the work force for about ten years. Then when they were in grade school I came here and worked part time. I started out doing testing, just on the weekends and so on, and then I got a part time job as an advisor and then a full time job came open and I really wasn't probably ready to go back full time, but I was afraid it was going to pass me by and then I would be stuck part time. So I got the full time job and then after I started back here I got my Master's in Counseling. So I'm an academic advisor. Right now I'm a Senior Academic Advisor at YSU.

S: Wow. And you mentioned your children married?

K: No, my children aren't married. No. I have a 27-year-old son and a 30-year-old son. They just are living the bachelor life and I wish they'd be married, but they're not. That's their life and so they're happy and that's okay with me.

S: And you're married?

K: Yes. My husband works at General Motors.

S: Now a little bit of the discussion of your involvement in the union at YSU.

K: Okay.

S: First, why do you consider unions important for higher education?

K: I think they're important for anybody who's working and if you're able to have a union it's all the better for you. I think a lot of times people in education feel like they're "so-called" professional and they're above the union mentality I guess, but I think any working middle-class person needs the protection of the union. I've come to learn over the years that companies, boards of education, whatever, are not going to do anything for you out of the kindness of their heart, so anything that you have you have to struggle for and there is the power in numbers. I think the example of school teachers is the best example where school teachers actually never really earned a living wage I don't think until they became unionized, and that can be said of the entire middle-class I think. I think unions are what made the middle-class in America and I think they're still important today.

S: What union are you involved with at YSU?

K: Our union is called the YSU Association of Professional Administrative Staff. It is the newest union on campus.

S: When was it formed?

K: I started here in 1985 and they were just organizing. Their very first contract I believe was 1987.

S: Did you have any role in that organization process?

K: Not at all. No. I actually was starting part time and I was just hearing, in fact I worked with one of the people who was on the first negotiating team, so I would just see him leave all the time to go do the negotiating. But really I wasn't involved in any of the discussions or anything that was going on.

S: How long have you been involved in that then?

K: Probably since about the early 1990s I'd say. I started out as a building rep and then I became the grievance chair in around the mid 1990s and also got involved on the negotiating teams at that time, so I'd say 10-12 years maybe I've been involved.

S: Okay, with those different roles that you did do, could you describe them for me a little bit?

K: Sure. The grievance chair at that time, (I think we have things a little better organized today,) but at that time, we had what was called at-large representatives and they weren't really assigned to buildings and their roles were vague. They really weren't used I don't think in the way that they should have been. So every problem would just come straight to the grievance chair. I would get a lot of calls as the grievance chair but we didn't file a lot of grievances. For some reason, the people in our unit are very hesitant to file

grievances or to have their names attached to anything like that. So we were involved in things like what we called meet-and-confers where we talk a lot. We'll have meetings with supervisors and maybe just over general topics. But getting involved in that way, I met a lot of people on campus. I met a lot of supervisors. I came to know quite a few people and then when it was time to run for the negotiating team I thought I was in a really good position because having seen so many of the problems that existed, I thought maybe, being on the negotiating team, I would be able to contribute a lot and I think I was able to.

S: Now, it's my understanding all these positions within the union are unpaid.

K: Exactly, and now I'm the president and still it is unpaid.

S: So what makes you do it?

K: I think being in a position to get something done that I don't know how else it would get done if somebody didn't fight for it. And after awhile, when you have known so many people (and I think have a good relationship with a lot of the administrative people on campus,) you're in a position to make a difference for people and I guess that's what it is. It's just knowing that you can do something and if you would sit back and not do it and just let the problem exist, and I guess I just enjoy helping people. I have my Master's in Counseling too, so I guess I just enjoy helping people. But that's why I do it, just because you can make a difference.

S: When you were on the negotiating team, could you tell me kind of what that was like?

K: It was an education. A couple of the negotiations were not good. We were not on good terms with the administration at that time for a lot of reasons, and it was very frustrating. Very, very frustrating. And our union is the smallest, other than the police, which is not affiliated with OEA. There are actually four unions on campus, but the police unit is not OEA. So we are the smallest OEA unit on campus and I think a lot of our people still had that mentality where "I'm professional." A lot of them I don't think are really thrilled about belonging to a union and paying union dues and so on. So it's difficult to get our people enthused about things until they need you and then they see why it's good to have the protection of the union. But, I don't think we're as powerful as the other unions because of our numbers. We have approximately, depending on what week of the month, anywhere from 115 to 120 people. Only 100 of those are full time people, and so it's hard to get our people behind things, and I think in negotiations that makes it difficult sometimes. But I'd say for the most part, the majority of the negotiations I've been involved with have been good. I think they've been good. It's taken a long time. We, I think, have come a long way. I think it's sad because the people who are new don't realize how much the union has gotten them over these years. They just come here and see what benefits they have and don't know the struggle that's been behind it. But, the negotiations have been a really good educational experience for me.

S: Now, do those occur just prior to a new contract or is that ongoing?

K: It can be ongoing. They automatically occur right before a new contract, but in our past two contracts, there have been a couple issues that we knew would take quite a bit of time and it would have held up the final signing of the contract, so we established committees that continued. So the negotiating team does stay intact for the entire life of that contract and we have had these committees do their work and then come back to the table, so for the past two contracts it has been continuing.

S: What are some of the main issues that are negotiated for each contract?

K: Well, our main issue has been, and I think continues to be, some type of compensation for education and experience. We do not get an automatic step increase, which certainly most of the K-12 units in OEA, automatically for every year you're here, you get a certain percentage increase, and the faculty has something like that. It's not necessarily automatic; they do have to do some things. The classified staff has those. The classified staff is civil service, and they were well-established when we got started, and the boards that negotiated with them at that time provided for the step increases, but with us they never have and that's been our struggle, so time and time again in negotiations that seems to be the sticking point.

S: How long are the contracts for?

K: Ours are for three years.

S: Three years. Do you know why, and I understand you weren't involved with the organizational process of your union, but do you know why the employees chose to go with OEA?

K: No I don't. I think, from what I understand, it was because the other two units on campus were. The people in our unit in a lot of other higher education settings are either part of the faculty or part of a classified staff. Our unit here at YSU is unique, I think in the state and I think there may be a very few in the nation, but we are unique and that I think is another reason for sometimes some of our struggle. I think when we were first even thinking about organizing there was talk of having a lot of our people go with the faculty, and for whatever reason that didn't happen, so they had to look for their own unit. But our positions are so varied on campus. We do have some people in the computer center, for example, who are in our unit. Other people in the computer center are in the classified unit. That's all established at the state. The university and the state have established who's in our unit and who's not at SERB. But a lot of the people in our unit, for example, our librarians, and at many universities librarians are part of the faculty, so I think in their beginning organizing days they were just looking at what was here and thought, "They are established, we'll go with OEA." But I think other people would be able to tell you more about that.

S: You say the positions are varied. You said some are from computer services. You're an advisor. What are some of the other positions?

K: Librarians, people in the admissions office, the recruiters I should say in the admissions office, those folks that go out to the high schools and so on and the college fairs and do the recruiting, the people in the counseling office, which is now singular, it's not plural anymore, we have one person who's a psychological counselor, all the advisors, a lot of the people in the student services areas are in our unit, a lot of the assistant directors, for example, the assistant director of student activities is in our unit, the people in the communications area, for example, the people who deal with the media and so on, they are in our unit.

S: To be considered to be part of your union, do you have to have a Bachelor's degree or any minimum education requirement?

K: I don't think you have to as far as the definition at the state level, but I can say I think this university does use that as the standard of who to put in our unit or who to put in a classified unit. Right now, there is only one and I think it's because it's been left over for a long time, there is only one person who's job description does not require a degree. I think a few require an Associate degree, but some other licensing. But other than that every one of our positions says, "Bachelor's required." Most say "Master's preferred," and then there are some with actually a "Doctorate required."

S: Okay.

K: So as the standard, almost everyone on our unit does have their degree.

S: Being part of OEA, which is something that is typically thought of as K-12 institution, how well do you think your union fits in with it?

K: Personally, I don't think we do. I don't know what other one we would better fit in. I think OEA is looking now at doing a lot of things to try to make higher education certainly more inclusive into their mission. But again, the people in our particular unit still, even at the higher education level, you have faculty and you have staff and we're either one or the other. Or are we staff? What kind of staff are we? Are we support staff? So, our identity is still being decided at the OEA level. They've certainly been a wonderful help to us. They provide to us the labor relations consultant, which there is no amount of money that you could say is worth having that person. But I think when you start going to the state meetings and even the national meetings, which we usually don't even send a representative, because for the most part, they are dealing with teacher's issues, which they should. That is where they came from, but it doesn't always have a lot to do with us and our issues so we don't find it really urgent to try to get to a lot of those meetings.

S: So you still haven't forged an identity so to speak within OEA?

K: No, I don't think we have. Now there is the higher education advisory council at OEA, it's called HEAC, and they do meet at least three or four times a year and that is probably the one group that at least when you go to the meetings there are some things

you can identify with when they talk because they are dealing with higher education issues. But even at that group, there's faculty and there's staff and a lot of them just aren't the people that we have in ours, but they do listen. They want to know what's going on. They'll help us whenever they could. One thing that sometimes has been a problem is just them providing data for us when it comes to negotiating, giving us the data, because what they've gathered is mostly for faculty and types of units that are like a classified staff. They have not really been able to provide that type of thing for us. They want to and they've attempted and they want to know how they can. They've tried to be very helpful. It's really not their fault that they can't do this, it's just that we're still trying to figure out how we can better use them I guess. So it's on us I guess to try to figure that out.

S: How smoothly have the negotiations gone that you've been involved with?

K: For the most part they have gone well. There were a few as I said that were not as good as others. We came to a point in the year 2000 where we gave a ten-day strike notice and had to have a federal mediator come in at the end. That was the one and only time that it wasn't good, but it turned out okay because we established a sub-committee to work on the big issue which was how we are classified, where we are, where we place in a paygrade and so on. That was the big issue and so we established a committee to work on that and actually the university did hire an outside consulting firm to come in and do a complete overhaul of our pay structure. So it turned out well. A lot of people still weren't happy about where they ended up, but I think when it comes to money, it's hard to make people happy.

S: But, so really, that was a success for you guys?

K: Yes it was. We really took a huge step in that. Now the other problem still remains of reward for education and experience, which still keeps you in one paygrade and we, with this last contract, have just actually signed again one of these continuing articles through a subcommittee. We've established a new memorandum of understanding for our current contract that is attempting to try to address when people do take on more responsibilities and so on, how they can be compensated. So it's been signed and now it has to really be put to the test to see if it will work.

S: So have there been any strikes for your union?

K: No there haven't, just a strike notice was filed once.

S: Yes. Okay, now moving onto your current role as president. How long have you been president?

K: I was the vice-president starting in around, I want to say 1992, 1993, and our president went on an extended sick leave so I assumed her role at that time for awhile. And then she came back and so I was the vice-president again. Then she actually got a job with OEA, she's a labor relations consultant now, and when she left then I became the

president for a short time, and then they had an election because I really wasn't ready to because of other responsibilities, not ready to do that. So they had an election and the person who got elected, I served as her vice-president and then she got a job off-campus so I was the president again. So it just seemed at though I was supposed to be the president.

S: You were meant to be.

K: So when it was time then to have another election, everyone wanted me to run so I did. So I was the president for one term and then I was not able to do this, there were some other things going on so I said I really needed a break from it. So another person who had been involved in the union for quite awhile was going to be retiring, and she said, "Well, I'll take on the role, if you'll stay the vice-president and then when I retire you can get it back." She retired a month ago so here I am, again.

S: You're destined to be president.

K: I had a break for a year and a half; so off and on for about ten years I guess you could say I've been the president.

S: What are some of your duties as president?

K: Well, actually I head the executive committee, which really takes care of the business of the union. We meet at least once a month. I oversee the building reps who are also our grievance representatives. I oversee the chief grievance chair who consults with me most of the time. I try to let the people who have the jobs do them without being directly involved all the time, because I think I came to learn where you just can't be because if you were involved in everything, you wouldn't have time to do your real job, which is the one you get paid to do. So our grievance chair does quite a bit. People tend to want to call directly the grievance chair and we've, I think, established now that you've got to start with talking to your building rep and then the building rep will meet with the grievance chair. And I usually get in on it at some point if it's getting to the point where you're going to have more hearings and eventually maybe go to arbitration. I also work closely with the treasurer, making sure that the dues are being kept up, and the list from payroll is up to where it should be. And just generally I meet once a month with the executive director of human resources just to talk about general problems, and I do get an awful lot of phone calls. I spend a lot of time in my office on the phone from people who just want to call and let off steam. Also, even supervisors will meet with me informally, over coffee or whatever, just to talk about some concerns they see that might be coming. They'll want my advice about something. "Am I handling this okay? Do you think there's going to be any problems?" So, it's just a huge time commitment, but I think we are able to keep a lot of things at bay by discussing things ahead of time before they blow up.

S: About how many hours say, per week, do you devote to the union?

K: It depends. Now this past month because I got it back again, I have been reviewing lists and so on and getting things back into my computer in my database and so on. I'd say at least, in a normal week, ten hours, of my 40-hour workweek. I don't even know how much I spend at home. I do a lot at home either reviewing things in the contract, or typing memos, or doing things. I try not to use a lot of my work time to do things like that, to do paperwork, or to work with my databases or whatever. The university is not paying me to do that and I'm really conscientious about that and most of the time I'm using at work is either attending meetings that I'm permitted to attend in my role or being on the phone talking to our people, which the university, I believe, thinks is okay. But I don't think that I have taken too much time away from my normal work duties, because there are two other people that I work with in my office that have the same position I have, and if I'm not doing what I'm supposed to be doing, then that adds to their work and I don't think that's fair because I chose to be a union president that should make more work for other people in our area. I never ask our student help to do anything at all that has to do with union work. I wouldn't even ask them to go deliver something to another office. You draw the line, and because I have chosen it, doesn't mean it should make work for anybody else.

S: Now, how long will you be president? How long is a term?

K: 2006 is when our term is up, at the end of August, but our new contract will begin at that same time, so I do have one more at least. The president is automatically placed on the negotiating team, so I know for sure one member who is already on the negotiating team and that's me, so I know I'll have at least one more to go through.

S: Are there term limits, since you've served before?

K: There are limits as far as serving on the executive committee. You can have different jobs on the executive committee, but we don't tend to have that problem.

S: Why do you feel that there is a need for, there are actually four different unions, but the three unions involved with OEA, why is there that need to have three different ones on one campus?

K: Well, I think they all have different needs. I'm still not sure whether or not we couldn't have been absorbed into maybe the other two somewhere with our entire membership when we organized, but since we didn't, we are three. But I think it's because everybody's interests are very different. You have the classified unit, who is civil service. They live under a completely different set of rules. There are things that govern them that don't have anything to do with the rest of us. So there is definitely a need for them to be organized. We have the faculty who have their own issues that are not like ours at all. And I have always said that in any organization, you don't have unions until you need them. There are many professional people who are not organized. But unions came about because there was a need for them. The people involved voted to have the union for some reason, rather than not have a union. So I think when you look

at YSU and see four unions on campus, I think that says a lot for the labor environment here, but you have unions because you need them, period.

S: Did you have any involvement with any of the other unions, with their organizing?

K: No, because they were organized long before I came here.

S: Okay. When it comes to bargaining, is it separately or together?

K: Yes, it's together. We certainly keep up with what is going on. Once they actually start negotiating, you're not allowed really to talk about it. Usually both sides agree that you're not to bargain on the street or in the media and so on. So we really don't know a lot about it, because we're not really allowed to, but certainly before negotiations, we consult with each other. All of the unions on campus used to meet more than we do, but we would have meetings. Just the leadership of all the unions would meet just to discuss what's going on with you, what's going on here, just so we're aware of everybody's issues so that if something does come up we're not blindsided by it, and we certainly do support each other. We will always support each other. This coming year the faculty and the classified unit both are negotiating and we're watching closely. They are the two largest groups on campus and we know that what the results of theirs will be will have a huge impact on us when we come up a year later, and so we're keeping up with everything and remain a hundred percent supportive of whatever they're doing.

S: So the actual bargaining is separate but you stay informed with one another about what's going on?

K: Definitely.

S: Could you discuss the current state of your union?

K: The current state of our union is good other than people still not being satisfied about being rewarded for education and experience. That is the one issue that just never goes away. Otherwise, I think most of our people are okay with what's going on in their particular work areas. So as of now I think there's still a lot of little problems that surface, that bubble up here and there. We usually tend to be able to take care of those with a meet-and-confer. We just show them the contract. All we ask of the supervisors is that you live by the contract that you as well as us have signed to say that you will live by, and I will tell the same things to our members. If they call me and there's a problem, I'll say, "Here's what the contract says. Are they violating the contract? No. Then we don't have an issue." So I think for the most part we're okay.

S: What do you consider to be your union's greatest achievement for the YSU employees?

K: I think up until now, probably the review of the work positions, the consulting firm that came in. I think we made a lot of progress. I don't think we're where we want to be

yet, but because that has been our one issue since I can remember, the fact that anything at all was done about it, I think is good. So that's probably the best thing we've done, other than being able to negotiate the increases, the percentage increases and so on for them to keep them up within a working wage actually because I don't think it would've been done if somebody didn't go and ask for it.

S: How do you feel the union's protecting the employees today?

K: I think just by having rights in the work place, protection, I think job security, as well as that can be defined today, is at least provided, in a union environment. The fact that someone just can't walk in and say, "You're done tomorrow," and the day after that, their nephew comes in and starts the job. That kind of thing can't happen because of the union. I think just the protection of job security and the idea of being able to discuss and bargain issues is the best thing that a union can do for people and that's what we do I hope.

S: Now I have a feeling what your answer is going to be, but if you could accomplish one thing in this term of your presidency, what would it be?

K: I think it's interesting that you see that we _____ for the same thing, but for our people to be rewarded for their education and experience as just about every group who works in an education setting receives.

S: Sounds fair enough to me. How would you rate the success of the union?

K: I think if you were probably to ask most of the people in our union, I'd say we're maybe at 70% of where they'd want to be. I think we still have a lot of work to do.

S: Well that concludes my questions. Is there anything else you'd like to add?

K: I don't believe so. I think this is a wonderful thing that you're doing and it'll be there for posterity and I have a great respect for history.

S: Well thank you.

K: Okay.

S: If you have nothing else to add, this concludes the interview.

K: Okay, thank you.

S: Thank you.