

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Women in Labor Unions

Personal Experience

O H 1872

KASEY KING

Interviewed

by

Erin Holmes

on

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KASEY KING

Kasey King has been working at the General Motors Fabricating plant for only a year and a half. She graduated from Austintown Fitch High School in 1990 and went on to attend Bowling Green State University. After only a year at Bowling Green, she transferred to Youngstown State University and graduated from there in 1996 with a bachelors degree in Professional Writing and Editing. At YSU she worked on the school newspaper, the JAMBAR, and had aspirations of being a journalist after graduation. She was hired at General Motors a year before she graduated from college and now she plans to be there until she retires. At the plant she is active in her union by working on the union newspaper, the "Focus". Kasey is only 25 years old, is not married, and has no children. As a fork-lift operator, she hopes to become more active in the union in the future and would like to especially encourage other people her age to also become active in the union.

H. This is an interview with Kasey King for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program on Women in Labor Unions by Erin Holmes on May 20, 1997, at 5:00 pm

Tell me about growing up in Youngstown

K. Kind of boring. A lot of people say there is nothing to do, or sometimes it is very hard to find things to do. That is about it. I guess I could have lived in worse areas. I always wanted to get out. Growing up in the same place for 20 years, well 25 now, I kind of wanted to get out and go somewhere else. Then I got a job and I am going to be here for a while. That is about it.

H. Do you remember going to Austintown Fitch? What was the school system like?

K. Educationally, it was pretty good. It was pretty hard, though, because the classes were always so big. Not the classroom size, but I still have people come up to me and say that they have graduated with me and all these things. It is a big area. It is hard to know people and keep friends. A lot of people moved away.

H. You graduated in 1990 and you went on to college. Did you go to Bowling Green first?

K. Yes, I went to Bowling Green for a year because I wanted to get out of Youngstown. I liked it. It was a small town. It was nice being away and trying to grow up on your own. Make some mistakes and all that stuff. I think I had a little too much freedom, so I came back and lived with my parents for a little while and went to school.

H. How long did you go to YSU?

K. Five years. I took a couple quarters off, on and off, just because I was not sure what I wanted to do. I changed my major a few times. About five years, I think.

H. And you have a bachelors degree in what?

K. Writing and Editing. I have a minor in speech and graphic design. Speech actually ended up being my minor because I thought that is what I wanted to do for a while. Then I could not decide on a minor so I went to graphic design. That is my chosen minor.

H. So what are your plans to do with your degree?

K. I wanted to move down to Charlotte and work on a newspaper. But the job I have now, I do not think I could ever make as much money. Going into

newspaper work, I know they do not pay as much and I know I could not get the benefits. I am working on the newspaper at work and that is about it. The guy is probably going to retire soon and all the people that are on the newspaper are a little bit older. So maybe I will try and run that. I will get a few days off work just to work on the newspaper. I figure that is at least partially what I wanted to do. What I really want to do is work on redesigning the paper. There is so much new technology out there that they are not using on the newspaper that can make it that much more attractive and increase the readership and things like that. That is what I want to do. I have been writing a few stories, trying to get used to it.

H: It is the union newspaper?

K: Yes. It is called Focus.

H: What kind of articles and information goes in that newspaper?

K: President, Vice President, Shop Chairman, and all those, the higher up positions write stories on, you know, if someone writes a question or if there is something going on in the union, they always try and explain it. Write interesting articles on people doing charity work and things like that. They will set up an interview with them and write about that. They will write about some people's children -- if they are going to college, what they are going to do. They write about retirees, the credit union and anything that is going on there. Any events that the union is holding, for the kids or parties, just all kinds of stuff. It is just like its own little community. There is all kinds of stuff in there.

H: The factory itself?

K: Yes, because there are so many people. The union is always holding events.

H: While you were at YSU you worked on the JAMBAR. What did you do there?

K: I was the Advertising Manager for a year, and then I was the Managing Editor for half a year, and then I got the job at GM. I had also gotten a job at the Vindicator, too. I got a job at the Vindicator one weekend and the next weekend I got a job at GM. I just finished up school and got a job at GM.

H: How was doing the newspaper at school different from doing the union newspaper?

K: I think people are much more involved. Going to school, practically everybody working on the newspaper, that is what they wanted to do. Whereas at the union, people are just working there. Once in a while they write a story. It is just something they put out to them, a little something extra that they do. Whereas for school, you were working for your resume. At school people were always in

the office and everything. We do not even have an office at the newspaper at work. It is kind of like writing a story and then giving it to the editor. And once in a while you help them out, lay it out at the union hall.

H If you could remember, I know it is kind of hard, what did you expect when you first started working at General Motors?

K I expected to quit within three months because I had my heart set on going into the field that I wanted to; trying to get away for a while, find somewhere else to live, see what else is out there. I remember thinking, you know you here stories all the time, "It is so easy out there. All they do is sit around and every once in a while they do a little bit of work." I have heard so many stories about that. I was just in shock the day I started. I have never been so sore in my life. I think I came home and cried for a couple of hours. I was just thinking, "I am going to save up all this money and go somewhere." I blew it all. The more I make the more I spend now.

H What is the reality, now, and how long do you think you will be at General Motors?

K Probably for the rest of my life. It is not the funnest job in the world, but I am sure there is a lot worse out there. Once you learn the job and you get used to it, it is not so bad. There are a lot of good people out there. And it helps the day go by a little bit faster. You work 40 hours a week stress free, come home, and you are done. You do not have to worry about deadlines or there is more work at the office. So it is not so bad.

H How did you get involved in your union?

K Pretty much just through the newspaper. We just had elections a couple weeks ago. There were all kinds of people running for different offices walking around, and most people do not listen or they have a friend who they know they are voting for. I kind of listen to them. There was an informational meeting that we went to to meet the candidates. I attended that. I ended up writing a story about it, and a lot of people were not too happy with me. We have about 800 people in our crew and about 55 showed up, which was real depressing since there are so many new hires out there that do not even know the people that are running, but voted. So I wrote a story about that, trying to get more people involved, even though I am not as involved as I should be. At least I care, and I just wrote a story to try and get people to realize that it is important. Some people were not too happy with that because they thought I was cutting them down.

H. Has your union encouraged you to get involved in the community outside?

K. There are events that I wanted to participate in, but I have not yet. I am sure I

will down the road They have all kinds of events for Toys for Tots and Big Brothers and Big Sisters Someday I will

H. How about political activities outside the politics and the factory Does the union support any particular candidates?

K. They print them in the newspaper and things like that It is my vote though, I am not swayed by that

H Has being part of the union changed your attitude towards social issues?

K. I do not know Social issues? Give me an example

H Like health care benefits?

K Yes, it has I guess. I do not know, because I am younger I have not really had to deal with that I was always covered under my mom and dad's insurance. You pay a little more attention to it since we do have to pay for part of it

H What are some of the important issues that women are pushing for in the union?

K I really do not know of any I mean, I guess I see some things that they should be pushing for We are pretty much treated equally There are lots of men out there that still think women should not be there They are hard on you and say things you do not want to hear You have to put in committee calls and argue about it. There is nothing against women, as far as I see, but a lot of the members have problems with women It is not really problems with the union, it is problems with the union brothers and sisters There are just a lot of men out there that can be hard on you

H What are the issues that you think women should be pushing for?

K. That is kind of bad. One thing that I would think women should push for is, I know if I ever have kids down the road, I am going to want to take more than just a month or two off than what they give you I know a couple of girls who have just gone out to have kids They were only off for like two months I think it is really important to be with your kids for the first few years of their life That is like the developmental stage of their lives Maybe if they could be more flexible with scheduling I know it is hard to do, it is a factory and they need so many people there at a time If they could work something out to work part time or something like that so you could grow up with your kids and help your kids grow the first couple years I think that would really be important

H. Are there different demands placed on women than placed on men in the factory or in the union?

- K There are certain jobs where men always say, "You cannot do that job. You are a woman." I think that is kind of unfair because I know I have done jobs that are supposedly jobs for men, that some men cannot do and I can. That is about it. Except for that feeling that you always need to prove yourself, no, there are no demands placed on women.
- H Now does the management and the factory treat women? Are they treated differently?
- K Some of them are. Some women do get treated differently by some management, but there is all kinds of rumors flying around about why that happens. Some of them are slime balls, to tell you the truth [Laughter] Some of them are. But no, for the most part. Well, that is a rough question. There are all kinds out there. There are some that can give you a really hard time if you are a woman because they are one of those people who just do not think you belong there or do not think that you can do the job. And then there are some that just look at you like you are a little weakling and give you the easy job and then everybody else complains about it because you are a woman. For the most part, they all treat you pretty equally. There are some women who are different.
- H You work in the fabricating plant, right?
- K Right.
- H I have been talking to women who work at the other job and they all have talked about the very strict sexual harassment policies you have written.
- K I know that they are very strict policies. I remember one time, some guy made just one little comment to this one girl who I was working with, which personally, I would not have taken much offense to, but she did. There were just all kinds of union people down there and I know he was taken in and talked to for a really long time about it and written up for it. There are really strict policies. Just some women do not call them on it.
- H Are there many women in positions of power in your union?
- K In the union? I can only think of one or two women in the union. Actually, one of them got elected. Not in the extreme power positions, no, but there are a few women -- I know of two -- who are alternate committee women. They just get sent out on committee calls and make sure all the grievances are handled right. I do know that they get a lot of respect because they do their job and they do it well. I know of lots of guys who say, "Call the woman," because she is just straight forward. But not in the higher positions, there are not any. Not as of yet.
- H Do the women in the union try to work together to try and elect women into those

positions?

K: Well, I have not been there for previous elections, but in this past election, the one woman did not even have anyone running against her because she was good. One who is running for election, not re-election, a lot of women around her are saying, "You have got to get women in the union." I think that is how she got a lot of the votes. Other than the fact that she was one of the most qualified people, I think a lot of votes came because she was a woman and people want to get women in the unions.

H: Have you ever been personally discriminated against because you were a woman?

K: Oh yes. Lots of times. I remember my first day, they shipped me over from my old assembly, which is one side of the plant, to the press room, which is where I am now. The first job that they put me on was the van sides, which is the "man" job. They are like these big heavy panels. I remember the second I went to go lift one, this guy came over and started screaming in my face, "You cannot do this job. You are a woman." He was literally screaming at me and I was ready to cry. I did the job and the entire time, I worked on the job for probably like six months, and he never said another word to me. That day they took me out, I remember the same guy who was screaming in my face told them to see if I could do another job, which was another hard job for a man or something. You get a lot of sexual harassment, people staring at you up and down lots of times. Other than that, I am sure there has been lots of things. But I cannot really pinpoint them right now.

H: Have you ever had to file any grievances with your union?

K: No, not yet. I am sure there will be small ones.

H: Do you feel like the people in the positions of power of the union are working to help the women out in the factory so they do not get the sexual harassment as much?

K: Every once in a while we have meetings that we have had to go to. And sometimes things like that are brought up. Sometimes they are held by the union and sometimes they are held by management. Actually, both of them, I think, have brought it up. There is an employee assistance program that has a meeting every once in a while, I do not know how often it is, and they talk about all kinds of issues and that is one of them. They do stress it. They try and show you different views of harassment. They even showed one man being harassed by a woman. They take all different angles on it. Harassment is definitely not accepted at GM.

- H Have there been any strikes while you have been at General Motors?
- K Yes there have been a few Two of them, I think
- H. What was your role?
- K Actually, they were other plants that had gone on strike that shut us down I know the assembly plant kind of staged a wild cat strike the one day, and another one walked out, but that was over there That was not our plant That was because of their union leader or their shop chairman, not ours No, I have not gone out on any picket lines or anything. I sat at home and patiently waited to get called back to work
- H With other companies striking in the area, have you done anything to help out any other unions, with them on strike?
- K No, I have not To help out other unions, no
- H Does your union encourage that?
- K They support that Yes, they do support them. And there are people who do go out there and support them But I, personally, have not yet.
- H How would you personally encourage women to become more active in the union?
- K That article, for one I have talked to a lot of my friends because they were not at the meeting and a lot of them are women, especially being new. In a few years, everyone is going to be retired and all the people that are in the union now are going to be out I have not necessarily made it a woman issue, but more of like they have got to care about what is going on I try to make sure I know what I am talking about, as far as the new contract and everything. I try to pay attention to what I can do and what I cannot do. A lot of times, people will sit there and discuss all the rules and everything, they will sit there and look it up and discuss it But nobody has actually gotten involved You can become an alternate, alternate committee person, and one person that just ran for election but did not get it, I keep telling him to see about being an alternate because there will be another election in three years, and some of the people that are in office are not going to be there in three years That is about it. I never made it a woman issue, I do not think Not as much as a get involved, instead of just sitting around and complaining about it, do something
- H How is the relationship between women on the floor of the plant?
- K Most of us kind of bond, sit there and complain about all the men because a lot

of them are bad What is the question again?[Laughter]

H: What is the relationship between the women?

K It is pretty good Everybody just tries to bond and vent about things that are going on There is this one woman who I always talk to who is in skill trades, she is always trying to get a lot of women into skill trades because right now there are not many and you get a lot of slack People say they do not know what they are doing, but there are some very educated women out there who could do a better job instead of some of the men Just kind of talk about that.

H. Do you have any aspirations of becoming a skilled tradesman?

K: I was actually thinking about it I do not know if going to school for another four years to learn about robots or electricity and things like that are really my thing It would be nice. I just do not know if it is for me. It seems like it is an interesting job, but I do not know if I would want to do that. It is a lot of math and things that I know I am not good at Even though it looks interesting, I do not know if I could do it I could try

H. Have you ever thought about running for an office, maybe later?

K I do not know Sometimes I think I am kind of a push over, sometimes I do not know if I could be a strong enough person to handle a lot of the problems that they do and to be as pushy as you need to be and to be as persuasive as you need to be It would be interesting

H. Do you have many women working as shop stewards?

K Shop stewards? I have not even heard of them

H I do not know exactly what it is either, all I know is that my dad was one At the assembly plant they have them They are union representatives that are down on the floor that work on the line, physically

K Oh, there are some Like the trustees and people like that They work on the line and then sometimes when events happen at the union hall, they go and make sure they are all set up and things like that I know the financial secretary, I actually worked with him one day

H What exactly do you do for your job now?

K: Actually, two days ago I just started driving a fork lift. I started out in assembly, which is sort of an assembly line, but not your normal follow the line and work while you are walking I started off there as a welder operator I loaded pieces

onto different robots and hit buttons and it all welded together. I never actually had to do welding. Then I went to the press room, and they just make you do anything they want to over there. You can stack metal or be in stock or sometimes you have cross operators or you are the cleaning lady. I used to do all kinds of things over there. Then I just started driving a fork lift, which I thought would be the easiest job there. It is scary. You are afraid you are going to hit people.

H Did you catch any flack from men for getting to drive a fork lift?

K Oh, yes, I have heard a lot of women driver comments over the past two days. A lot of people just like running in the opposite direction. Yes, I guess I have. But then again, anyone who is new on a fork lift, everyone makes fun of them. Something you have got to look out for.

H So you get to drive around the plant picking up things and moving them?

K Actually, I just trained, so I got to drive around the plant for 15 minutes the other day. That is starting Friday. That is what I will be doing.

H What do you think are some problems or issues that your union is working on and dealing with the company? Is there anything?

K I do not know. There is always a lot of things going on. Right now they all escape me. Why? What have other people said?

H About the assembly plant and getting their comp time back from when they were laid off the piers?

K Our plant was approved for it. Are you talking about between management and the union?

H Yes.

K I do not know. I heard there were a lot of people who are trying to get things back. There are always things going on.

H Do you happen to know much about your union's family leave policies and things dealing with family issues?

K I have not had to deal with those yet. I know they cannot be that great because I know if I just had a kid, I would not want to be back in two months. One of them had a C-Section and it was real hard for her to get an extra two weeks. That kind of scares me.

H What has been a real positive experience that you have had while working in the year and a half that you have been there?

K Maybe making new friends and meeting some of the nice people that are out there I guess that the first few months there were a lot of people, even though that is what they fought for was to get people in there, there were a lot of people that were happy because we were not there because we were not their kid or something For the first few months, I was real leery about staying there for three months just because people were kind of mean. Then you start to meet some of the nice ones and make friends It is kind of like a family, anyway, from home Since I live on my own, I do not get to see my parents that often. You are there 40 hours a week There are a lot of older people out there that are giving advice like your dad or mom would give you, so that is a positive experience. And working on the newspaper, those are positive experiences I am starting to learn a little bit more about the union and things that go on

H On the flip side of that, what has been the negative?

K There are a lot of racist people out there and there are a lot of cool people out there, too You see somebody who is not that pretty walk by or whatever or if there is one little thing wrong with them, people are cracking jokes left and right People are saying all kinds of things about women and different races It is sad that it is still out there And there is a lot of it out there

H. Are there many women working in the factory?

K. There is getting to be a lot more I really have this weird feeling, but that is probably one of the reasons why I was hired They are starting to equal it out. Yes, there are a lot of women out there

H How about minorities? Are there many minorities?

K Oh, yes It is pretty evenly spread.

H Well, I have gone through all the questions that do not involve being a mother or a wife or having been there for 30 years

K That is one thing I do have to say I do not think I could be a mother out there It would be so hard with all the different crews that they have, none of them are really that great for raising kids I do not know how those people do it I really do not I have enough trouble taking care of myself You work 10 hours or 12 hours, the last thing you would want to do is hear a screaming baby I give them all the credit in the world I do Anyone who has kids.

H. Have you ever engaged in industrial sabotage deliberately?

K. No, but I know people who have. I have seen it done

H Does it happen a lot?

K. No, I mean I have seen it done like a couple of times. People will sit there and try and throw a piece in the press wrong just because everybody else on the line wants to make time and that person is getting tired or just does not want to do it any more, so they will sit there and try to break the press and they will succeed I have done it Not purposely Just because I was not used to doing the job or something There are people who try to do it Lots of times

H I guess we can start to wrap up What are some things you want people to know about your experiences working in the factory and being involved in the union?

K: It is a good experience I am lucky there are unions out there with as much power as the UAW has That is about it It is a good experience because you have people fighting for the things that you want A lot of places do not have that. You kind of have to deal with what you get.

H Well, if you do not have anything more to add then I guess we can wrap it up. You have the unique position of being the only young person in this whole study, as far as I know. I do not think there is anybody else that has not been there for less than 25 or 26 years.

K I am sure they have some stories Come back to me in 10 years I am sure I will have some, I am sure

H Thank you very much then

K Thank you

End of Interview