

YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

OEA Union History

O.H. 2215

Sherri Martz

Interviewed

By

Heidi Lynn Scott

On

February 10, 2005

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INTERVIEWEE: Sherri Martz

INTERVIEWER: Heidi Lynn Scott

SUBJECT: OEA Union History

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P: This is an interview with Sherri Martz, for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on OEA Union History, by Heidi Lynn Scott, at YSU Media Services, on February 10, 2005. At 9:15 a.m.

S: Good morning.

M: Good morning.

S: Before we discuss your involvement with the union, I'd like to get some general background information. First, where and when were you born?

M: I was born in Meadville, Pennsylvania, on December 1st, 1951.

S: Could you describe your childhood for me?

M: I told my own children it was kind of like the Donna Reed family come to life. I grew up on the East Side of Youngstown since I was five years old. My mother was a homemaker, and my father worked for the Aerospace Corporation here in Youngstown. So it was pretty much typical, a stay-at-home mom, a working father; I went to East High School, and I have one brother, so it was the typical family life.

S: Have you been a life-long resident of the area?

M: Since I was five. We moved from Pennsylvania to the East Side of Youngstown when I was five, and I've been here since then.

S: Could you tell me a little bit about your educational background?

M: Well, I have my Bachelor's and my Master's degrees from Youngstown State. And I started to go to Boston College, but then I got married and ended up in graduate school here at Youngstown. So pretty much I'm a YSU person.

S: What field did you get your degrees in?

M: English, both of them.

S: Prior to working at YSU, what other work experience did you have?

M: Well, that's kind of tricky because I've been at mostly YSU since I was twenty or so. As a student at YSU, an undergraduate student, I worked at the post office, and then through graduate school I was a graduate assistant. Then I worked part-time teaching, became the Assistant Coordinator of the Writing Center, and then the Coordinator until I retired last month.

S: Could you describe the original position you had at YSU?

M: Which original position? Are we talking about the assistantship? Or part-time teaching?

S: Whichever one you want to describe, just to give us a background of some of the different things you've done.

M: Well, the graduate assistantship and the part-time teaching were both teaching composition classes. And then in January of 1982, I took the position of Assistant Coordinator of the Writing Center, and that's the one that got me started on the full-time career here. And that's essentially tutoring in writing, and I coordinated the activities under the supervision on the Coordinator for two years, and then I moved up into the Coordinator's position.

S: What position did you have when you retired?

M: Coordinator of the Writing Center.

S: And could you tell me your responsibilities with that job?

M: The Writing Center is a tutorial service in writing in all different disciplines. So I was responsible for hiring and evaluating the student tutors there. We also have a small staff

of adjunct faculty members whom I would train and supervise. We gave workshops in different areas for different disciplines. And also in that capacity I was responsible for the composition placement test when we tested all incoming freshmen.

S: What year was it that you became full-time at YSU?

M: 1982.

S: Moving on to a little bit about your involvement with the union. First, why do you consider unions important in higher education?

M: Well, coming from a family background of unionism, I think unions are important in any area. In higher education, it seems to me that because we are dealing with ideas that it's important that both faculty and staff have protection against attacks on academic freedoms and that sort of thing. It's essential for anyone who's in the working capacity to have some sort of job security, and unions will do that for you.

S: What union were you involved with?

M: I was a member of the Association for Professional and Administrative Staff.

S: Were you involved in the original organization process?

M: No. I remember voting when they started organizing it, but that was back, I think, in 1987, and I didn't become involved until several years after that.

S: Did you originally support the formation of the union?

M: I did.

S: Do you know what events preceded the professional union?

M: To my recollection, there was a lot of concern among the professional staff because there were such disparities in treatment. Some people, for instance, would get ten percent raises annually while others would get zero to two percent. So there was a lot of feeling that we needed to even that out, we needed to make sure that it didn't depend at individual supervisors' discretion. And also people could be let go. People would be shifted around and disappear at whims. So I think that was the feeling behind it.

S: You wanted to have more job security, then, and fair treatment.

M: Right.

S: What official positions have you served with the professional union?

M: I served as the recording secretary for probably six years. I was also on four negotiating teams throughout the years. And then a year-and-a-half before I retired, I assumed the presidency for that period of time.

S: Could you describe some of your duties when you were the recording secretary?

M: Essentially the recording secretary took the minutes. We have an executive committee which meets monthly, and it was the responsibility of the secretary to record those minutes and get them distributed. And we also had general meetings at least once a quarter and then once a semester, and the secretary would record those minutes and make sure they were available to the membership.

S: When you were on the negotiation teams, you weren't involved with the first negotiation?

M: No, I wasn't.

S: Could you describe your experience when you were on the team?

M: Experience in terms of collegiality? Or the issues that we dealt with?

S: Anything and everything.

M: I became more active and started having an interest in negotiations the year that – I'm sorry I don't recall the year that it happened, but at one point every member of our union was served a layoff notice. They simply pink-slipped us all at one time because they were afraid they were going to have layoffs, and they hadn't calculated in time to determine which people would be laid off. So we all got layoff notices, which caused, as you can understand – we had no warning of it, a lot of panic among the membership. And that was the point at which I decided it was important to know as much as I could know about what was going on, to have an active role in whatever I could with negotiations. Smaller issues tended to deal with things like continuity of employment. And one of the major things that we accomplished stemmed right off of that layoff slip incident when we managed to get six months notice; we now have to be given six month's notice if they're not going to renew our contracts. So we kind of prevented that sort of event from occurring again. It made them think a little harder about what they were doing before they could say they were going to lay everybody off. What they essentially were trying to do was guarantee that they could lay off someone, and in order to do that, they had to say they were going to lay off all of us. So we tried to take care of that. The bigger issues, of course, are always pay rate, an increase in pay, and health care benefits. Those are always the major issues, and those are typically tackled last, and they're the most difficult. Health care - we're tied so closely to the other two major unions that it's probably less of an issue for us than it is for ACE or for the Faculty Unit. So we were mostly struggling with issues of pay in our negotiations in attempting to make sure our members got a fair salary adjustment.

S: As of December when you retired, do you feel that the employees are getting a fair rate or no?

M: I think we made some big strides toward that when we had a salary adjustment made two years ago I think it was. I don't know if anyone else has mentioned the Buck Study that came through. Essentially the University agreed to hire an outside firm to look at the pay schedules, the pay rates, and how our members were paid. And as a result, we made some substantial adjustments so that we're probably more comfortable with where we are now than we were then; although I think those who were here the longest probably got the least adjustment. What we struggled to do was get a fair equity for the older people, the people who'd been here the longest, while making sure new people were brought in at a rate that would allow them to move through the system and keep increasing. I think as far as the straightforward percentage rates that we get, I think that we're probably on track at this point.

S: How often do the negotiations occur?

M: We have three-year contracts, so our current contract will be up in June of 2006.

S: How many negotiations were you actually involved with?

M: I believe it was four.

S: And did they typically go smoothly?

M: The first three that I went to, no, they were more acrimonious, more difficult. The last negotiations I participated in went much more smoothly. We've had a history of difficult situations across the table in which our team often felt as if they were not being treated respectfully, as if we also could not trust without double checking everything, that sort of thing. The last negotiations we had, as I said, went much more smoothly. At that point the Buck Study had been accomplished, so I think both sides had a more clear picture of what the real issues were.

S: Besides that study, was there any real change in anything else that caused it to go smoother? Was it a new administration?

M: I think the change in administration. We worked with different people this last time through than we had worked with before, and they certainly seemed more receptive to listening to underlying issues, issues of being treated professionally and respectfully. And also I think that they were more interested in genuinely coming to a fair kind of agreement rather than simply winning whatever it was they wanted to win.

S: Were you involved in any strikes?

M: No, we've never had a strike in our union. I recall a faculty strike back in the eighties, I don't remember when exactly, but that was settled before it really became a problem for

any of us, crossing the picket line. I don't think any of us would have been able to do that, so that was our only experience with it.

S: Have there been times when it has been close to a strike?

M: There have been occasions, I think, where we thought we might have to, but it never resolved itself that way.

S: Three of the four unions on campus are involved with the OEA. Do you know why the professional union chose to go with OEA?

M: Honestly, as I said I wasn't involved in the inception of it. It made sense, I would say, from the perspective that it's an educational union, and most of our members are actively involved in education in one way or another. So I suppose that was the governing reason.

S: How do you feel that higher education fits into the OEA, which is often thought of as...

M: K through twelve?

S: Yeah.

M: It can sometimes feel as though you're out there in left field by yourself. I think I realized that particularly when I became president and served. I think it was sixteen or seventeen months I was the president. A lot of the organizations that were available to us, or the meetings that we would attend, the conferences, did seem more geared toward k through twelve. But increasingly I saw an awareness of the issues of higher education and how those would interact with k through twelve. For instance, when I went to the last k through twelve OEA representative assemblies, I attended at the same time a meeting for higher education advisory council members. So there is an attempt to address those issues, and certainly the issues of union contracts, health care issues. Those tend to be the same.

S: Do you feel that when you have needed extra support from the OEA that they've been there for you?

M: Yes. We have good liaison work with our representative and I've been involved in very few, for instance, grievance hearings, arbitration hearings, but our representative has always been right on top of things. OEA had provided legal council when we've needed it, that sort of thing.

S: So even though you're not the primary objectives of OEA, because most of their focus is on secondary education, they still treat you as well as possible?

M: I think that we're treated as full members, so sure.

S: Could you describe some of the things that went on while you were president?

M: Well, being president was an eye-opener. I don't think I had realized how much time was involved. I would attend monthly meetings with Human Resources to discuss any issues that might have come up. I was responsible for having the monthly executive committee meetings and keeping members apprised, generally through e-mail, of any issues that came through with OEA or legislation or anything like that. But probably what was most surprising to me was the number of times that I would be dealing with individuals who had concerns about their contracts, who had concerns about issues with new departments, and because I was the name that they had, the name that they knew, I was often the first contact for them. So I think the sheer amount of time that was spent in working individually with members was a surprise to me. We do have building representatives, and those folks would often be a first contact for members. But then the building members would often come to me then too. So a lot of individual work that I hadn't anticipated.

S: About how many hours a week did it take up of your time?

M: I would say an average of fifteen to twenty. But sometimes it would be two or three hours, and sometimes I would be there every evening. So maybe fifteen hours a week.

S: And that's an unpaid position, correct?

M: That's unpaid, right. In fact, I had suggested at my last executive committee meeting - since I was on my way out, I suggested that they consider revising the constitution to perhaps offset the responsibilities of the chief grievance officer, the president, and the treasurer, who spends an inordinate amount of time simply by paying the dues out of the union. It seemed the appropriate time to do it since I wouldn't be personally benefiting from it. Because it is, it's a lot of personal time tied up, and you also have to attend, as I said, the representative assembly meetings, monthly meetings for uniserve council, all kinds of stuff that you're doing on your personal time.

S: How does that fit in to your work day?

M: Typically it does not. The time that you spend on union work is typically work that you're supposed to do on your own, so that if I were on the phone with a union member, I would typically make that time up. For things like grievance hearings, or regularly scheduled meetings, we have time built into our contract for doing that. But most times, like working on newsletters, or anything like that would be time on your own.

S: Now that's such a time commitment, and without being paid, why did you do it?

M: I did it because it's important. Our previous president was Sally Kenney; she ran as my vice-president, and I did it honestly as a favor to her, knowing that I would only have a short term. But I also did it because I wanted to know more about how the things worked, to have a clearer understanding of it. I think it's important for every member to

get as involved as he or she can. The more you know about how the system works, and who you turn to in what situations, the more effective you can be. I greatly admire the people who have done this job for six years, or nine years, or twelve years. We've had I think four presidents, so we've had some people in there who have been there for years. And their willingness to spend the personal time just astonished me.

S: It's very commendable.

M: It is. As I said, I knew going into it that I would be there I believe it was seventeen months, and then because Sally had run as my vice-president, she had agreed to step back in as president. But there's a lot to learn, and I think simply the learning process is an interesting thing in itself. So I don't regret doing it. I don't know if I would have the energy to do it for three, or six, or nine years, but certainly it's a commitment, and I value our leaders.

S: What would you say would be the greatest achievement that the professional union got when you were president?

M: Well, I was president for such a short time. I don't know that I could say we had a great achievement. What I worked toward was keeping things running smoothly, making sure that members understood that they could come to me. Certainly we had several meetings that we called "Meet and Confers." So I think probably just keeping things running smoothly was my main goal, understanding how the system worked, understanding what the responsibilities were, and making sure those were met. As far as within recent years, I think probably our gaining the Buck Study to look at our pay rate situation and how members were paid, how they moved through the system. That's probably been our greatest overall accomplishment, and that was before I was president.

S: Why do you feel there's a need for three different unions, all associated with the OEA on one campus?

M: Well, you're assuming I feel that there's a need for the three different ones, and I don't know. I think we have common issues, but certainly we also have very different issues. Faculty has one set of priorities and different responsibilities. Professional Administrative staff, we're forty hour a week employees, so our concerns about vacation, sick leave, those kinds of things, are very different. Many of us are not directly involved in classroom work, so that we're not as directly involved in education. Certainly service work toward education, but the issues of working conditions are very different. And I would imagine it's very much the same with ACE. Their priorities would be different. Their concerns would be different. Whether that could all be blended into one, large, union, I don't know. It would take some very difficult negotiating, I would think, to make sure that all the concerns of all the constituents were addressed if we were one union.

S: Were you here when the other unions were formed?

M: I don't recall when the faculty union started, so it must have been here. As long as I

can remember, it's been a unionized faculty. I believe ACE is now in its twentieth year, so I was here then. I don't recall anything about their organization efforts.

S: You didn't have any involvement in that originally?

M: No.

S: When it comes to bargaining, do the unions bargain separately or collectively?

M: We bargain separately. Our contract is up always a year after faculty and ACE. In a sense, part of it is collective in that the health care package will be the same. So we work very closely with faculty and with ACE in keeping informed of what's going on in that area because in a very broad sense it's as if they were negotiating for everyone, faculty, non-faculty, union, non-union, because they're after the same package. Other than that, the negotiations are totally separate.

S: How does that work, so everyone will have the same health care package, right?

M: Yes.

S: Is it that the faculty union negotiates for it, and then it just carries through?

M: Faculty and ACE will both be negotiating, in fact, probably are negotiating at this point. It can't carry through unless we agree to allow it. My recollection is that the last time that they made the change - I was not an officer at that point, but I believe a memo of understanding was signed by our president agreeing to switch to the new health care program. If we had not agreed to do that, then they would have had to carry us on the old program until the end of our contract, and then we would have negotiated it. So it's a matter almost of courtesy. Certainly it saves a fair amount of money for the University to have us all on the same program, so it's almost a courtesy to do that. Certainly the eventuality would be that a year later, we would be under the new program anyway. It's always an issue with us of whether our members are going to be losing something, so we would be looking to see whether or not that would hurt anyone if we switched whenever the University asks us to, and it's my belief that if it did, we would simply be waiting until we could at least get that next year under the old benefits. But that's not occurred at this point.

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

M: In what regard?

S: Do you feel it's cohesive, working as a group?

M: I would like to see more of the younger workers involved. It works cohesively as a group because we have a core of employees who have been here a number of years who worked very hard to make sure that it is. They protect younger workers energetically. I

think it's probably a fear among many unions that if you don't get the younger members involved, then the cohesiveness of the unit will falter. And certainly we are working harder to bring in people who have some investment in the University, who have been here a number of years, who expect to stay, to get involved in the leadership. Part of the difficulty, I think, is a difficulty that's nation-wide in the mobility of the work force. When you have people coming and going, they don't see the need to build a cohesive unit and to work for each other as well as for themselves. So I think that's a national concern, not just a Youngstown concern or a YSU concern. So I feel that we're reasonably cohesive, but I feel that we need to make sure that the younger workers realize the need for that union strength.

S: What do you consider to be the professional union's greatest achievement for its members?

M: I think it's probably a sense of security. Certainly we would have members who have perhaps not even made as much money as they would have if we had not unionized. As I said earlier, there were people who were making ten, twelve percent increases before the union, but I think you have a little more sense of security now. You have a group of people who will work to keep you from being unfairly dismissed. You will have a group of people who work to preserve your health care benefits which could have been eliminated before. And I think it's recognized among our members that working together is a strength, and I think that's probably the greatest thing that we have brought the union people is that there's a collective...I don't know if security is the right word for it, but a sense of community.

S: Now you said a little bit of job security so that they can't just hand out a pink slip, the administration.

M: They have to follow certain guidelines. We have a probationary period and non-probationary employees could be let go under different circumstances than a probationary person could. But we achieved continuity of employment, which is sort of our version of tenure, so no, you can't simply just be discharged and there you are, you're gone. So there are procedures that have to be followed, there are steps that have to be taken, and the union is there to make sure that nothing is amiss along the way. So in my recollection, at least in my years of memory, only one person has lost a job since I've been actively involved, and that, as I said, was followed through by the union, and I think it was before this person achieved continuity of employment, and they had to notify her three months in advance and then we could follow through and appeal. But I think that's the only case that occurred.

S: How are the unions protecting their members today?

M: In what sense protecting?

S: You've kind of already answered it with your previous answer, but...

M: Well, one of the concerns I think that (End of Side A of Tape). (Beginning of Side B) we have now is making sure that members aren't losing their jobs when the University outsources another function, which I think happened in Accounts Payable or Accounts Receivable, the finance area, somewhere that they are now outsourcing, but our members were transferred rather than losing a position. So it's that sense of protection. There's sometimes a feeling, I think, that the outsourcing is an effort to decrease the numbers of our union members. So there's always that concern, and we guard against that. One of the things that we work hard for is to make sure that because our negotiations tend to follow the two larger units, that we aren't hearing things like there's no money left, faculty took all the money, or ACE took all the money. We guard against them trying to turn the union members against other union members, and still make sure that our members get appropriate levels of recompense.

S: How would you rate the success of the professional union?

M: I think we're fairly successful. I think when we've had to address issues with the administration, we've been reasonably successful in doing so. We have a working relationship with them that is respectful on both sides, I think. We have a membership that knows it can turn to us when they have the need for it. So I would rate it pretty successful.

S: And what do you hope the union will achieve in the future?

M: I hope it will achieve greater strength from its younger members. I think that if the workers...as I said the problem tends to be with the mobility of the workforce. And we need to offer the younger employees enough that they see a reason to stay, to spend careers here rather than entry level positions and then leaving to build careers elsewhere. So that's the goal that I would like to see us achieve, involving younger employees more actively in the union.

S: Well, that's the end of my questions. Is there anything else that you would like to add?

M: Perhaps just that one of the accomplishments that I feel I met going through union activism is simply that I learned so much. I learned so much about people, I learned so much about the system, politics, that I feel I was enriched by it personally, and I would encourage anyone to make sure they know what their union is doing.

S: Well thank you. This concludes the interview.