

Youngstown State University  
Oral History Program  
YSU History

O.H. 2220

Julia Gergits  
Interviewed  
By  
Heidi L. Scott  
On  
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YOUNGSTOWN STATE UNIVERSITY  
ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM  
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INTERVIEWEE: Julia Gergits

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SUBJECT: YSU History

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P: This is an interview with Julia Gergits for the Youngstown State University Oral History Program, on YSU History, by Heidi L. Scott, at YSU on February 9, 2005 time is 9:30 a.m.

S: Good morning.

G: Good morning.

S: Before we get into your involvement with the union at YSU, I'd like to get some background information. So could you tell me where and when you were born?

G: Born in a suburb of Chicago on the southwest side of Illinois called Justice, Illinois, in 1956. I'm 46 years old, and I feel a lot older some days.

S: What was your childhood like?

G: That's a hard question, actually. The suburbs that we lived in at that point were actually the far-flung boon docks, so it was un-built completely, formerly farmland, grown-over prairie, so it was actually pretty empty in a lot of ways, and we just sort of ran wild. My father worked for the railroad and had come down with multiple sclerosis, so the family life was both bucolic and traumatic at the same time. I'm the oldest of five, so I knew more of the despair and unhappiness that my parents went through more than the younger ones did. So it was a pretty traumatizing time. They almost lost the house; there was a lot of trauma. I grew up really fast.

S: You said that was a suburb outside of Chicago?

G: It is; it's right on the border of Chicago. Now it's one of the interlink suburbs because the city has grown, but then it was pretty far out.

S: Could you describe what your parents did for a living?

G: My father worked for the railroad, Rock Island Railroad until he was forcibly retired because of multiple sclerosis. My mom didn't work until he retired, and then she went to work in a bakery, then a phone answering service, then a factory. She kind of moved around from job to job to try to supplement his income for the family.

S: Could you describe your educational background for me?

G: Sure, public schools always. I went to a little school first for grade school. I didn't go to kindergarten; they didn't have kindergarten when I started, so I went through sixth grade at a little school called Justice School. I went to junior high at a school called Wilkens. It was a feeder school for a lot of communities, so a lot of other children went there, and at that time the suburbs were growing rapidly so the schools got hugely bigger. Then I went to high school at Argo Community High School in Argo, Illinois, which is right on the border of Chicago. That was the first time we were around a lot of African Americans and Hispanics, and we were on a complete split-shift, so we went to school from noon until four, and juniors and seniors went to school from 7:30 until noon because the school was so crowded. So basically my whole four years of high school I had half-days of education. They did that for six or seven years before the state forced them to cut that out. It wasn't the best of schools. It was a bad school, and I sort of went to college with a grade-school education. I did okay. It was a poor neighborhood, and they got overwhelmed with the sheer volume of people who moved in, and they couldn't compensate quickly enough. It was a bad situation.

S: Wow, interesting! Now, after high school, what did you do?

G: To DePaul University in Chicago on the North Side. It's of the Vincentians, private colleges. I think now it's one of the biggest Catholic colleges in the country, it's a university. I majored in English. I did a little bit of communication work at DePaul. It was folded into the English department. From DePaul I went to Penn State for my master's degree immediately, then from Penn State to the University of Minnesota for my PhD. So, I just kind of kept pounding straight along.

S: Could you please describe the original position you were hired for at YSU?

G: I was hired as a ten-year track assistant professor for the English Department in 1990.

S: Did you get that right from . . .

G: No, my husband also has a PhD in English. We met in Minnesota. So part of what we were doing was moving around and trying to find two jobs in one place. First, we went to Klamath Falls, Oregon, and I taught at a little school called the Oregon Institute of Technology. Then we both hit the job market. He got a job here and I got a one at Illinois Institute of Technology in Chicago on the South Side, which is a private, mostly engineering and architecture university. Then, I applied here two years later, and they

hired me here. So he had already been here for two years when I came here. S, I had been out with my PhD for three or four years by that time.

S: Have you held any other positions throughout your career at YSU?

G: I was the acting department chair for a year, so I suppose that's a little different. I've been directors of different programs within the English Department. I direct Women's Studies right now, and I've directed Professional Writing and Editing. Except for that one year as department chair I've been in the union. I've pretty much been in the English Department nonstop.

S: Now, moving on to some questions about the union. First, would you consider unions in higher education important?

G: Crucial, vital, it is so important. It's unusual in a university for a faculty to be unionized. It's not common but I wish it were, actually. It's becoming a little better. It's protected us in so many ways here. The raises we've gotten, for instance, and the benefits that we've been able to preserve are far better than my friends and colleagues are getting at comparable universities across the country. We talk all the time and compare notes. They have no say-so over their raises; it's very uneven. Some members of the department get a big raise; other members of the department get very little. It's really capricious; promotions are less predictable than they are here. Any kind of a grievance procedure is just hellish, where at least here we have a very clear procedure and we have advocacy. It's just essential. I'm so glad. Every time I talked to people at non-unionized universities I tell them that have to get unionized! It's terrible to not have one.

S: How long have you been involved in the union?

G: Only about the last two or three years. I was a member of the union since I got here, but only recently became to get active, within the last few years. I decided that it was time to do something more actively, instead of just benefiting from the union that I should try to help. That's what got me involved in it, just deciding it was time.

S: Since you came here in 1990, is it safe to assume that you had no role in the original organizational process?

G: Yes, it's safe to say. That was in '80, wasn't it? Awhile back.

S: So let's talk about now, then. Do you hold an official position?

G: I'm on the negotiating team for the YSU OEA, and I'm also the first vice-president for the union right now.

S: Okay, could you describe first your role of vice-president?

G: I am a member of the executive committee, which makes a lot of the day-to-day decisions for the union and consultation with the president. I also do the newsletter, *The YSU Advocate*. I go with Michael, our president, to a lot of meetings, since at this time I'm learning the ropes, sort of following around. Mostly it's a decision-making group, a decisive body.

S: Then, on the negotiating team, what's that like?

G: It's very busy. In a lot of ways, it's more work than the executive committee, actually, because this is a negotiation year. We have meetings twice a week, and our meetings usual go several hours. We're re-writing and sort of moving through the whole document, trying to pull in new material that's happened over the last few of years to make sure we haven't missed anything. It's a lot of work, and we haven't even started meeting with the administration. This is just us. So it's tons of work.

S: When will you be meeting with the administration?

G: We don't really know. Imminently, we hope. We were supposed to have begun already, but I think they're simply taking a little longer to get to that point. The administration is just having a little harder time dealing with the budget cut that's coming down and resignations of the provost and various deans that I think it's hard for them to find time for this.

S: Negotiations, now, how often do they occur?

G: Every three years. Our contract is a three-year contract.

S: And have you been involved with any other negotiations?

G: No, only indirectly. I only know through the grapevine on the other ones. This is my first in-person one.

S: Since you've been here, have you been involved in any strikes?

G: No, that happened before I came. The faculty only struck once, I think. The only one I know for sure was in '89 and that was that one-day strike, and I wasn't here for that.

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

G: I think of us as being one union, actually, I don't think of us as being separate unions. I think of it as divisions that are specialized within the overarching OEA/NEA. So I don't think of them as separate, and that's actually been one of the things that I've learned by being more involved in the union, to think more carefully of my colleagues who are in ACE and APAS as actually my colleagues. I mean, I've always really liked them, but I've never really thought of us as having vested interests together, kind of knitted together. Now I think of them as us. That's their specialized branch and this is

our specialized branch. That way, you get better representations for their interests and their concerns because they work under different conditions than we do, but that we all need to be shoulder-to-shoulder on trying to work things out by with the administration, sharing ideas, sharing problems that we're having so we can all help solve them.

S: Do you know why the faculty chose to join the OEA?

G: As opposed to the other? The NEA and OEA are just far more powerful and really wonderful resources for us. The other union, as far as I understand it, because we've actually been talking about it, there were some members of the union who wanted to know whether we should change unions or not. We wanted to take a look at that, and even a quick look will show you that the benefits of NEA and OEA are so huge and the legal representation, the local advising, the openness, how quickly they answer questions, even the resources they have if we need them is just massive. The education that they offer to the new members of the team. They've been wonderful about helping the negotiating team get up to speed because a lot of us are new to that committee. They've offered all sorts of resources; they've offered training. So I think it has more apparatus to help you do your job than the other union does, which seems to be just a professional organization that doesn't help as much.

S: Do you know why were some people questioning that?

G: The union? I think we have some conservative members of the faculty who were annoyed by what they thought was a left-leaning, too liberal leadership in NEOEA. That annoyed them. They also weren't happy about the fees and costs; they wanted that 600 bucks back. So, once we put it on the table for them again, because some of the people just needed to be reminded, some of them were newer, and so we just needed to explain to them exactly what they were getting as benefits. It was all right. It pretty much allayed quickly. It wasn't something that became a serious question. It's right to, I think, keep asking those questions. I think NEOEA can hold up to scrutiny, but it's perfectly fine to put it up side-by-side to see what we've got. I think that's sensible to do. People will stay affiliated because they realize, "Oh, yeah, that's why."

S: About how many members are in the faculty union?

G: Michael would have the exact number. I think it's in the vicinity of 370 or something like that. It's a pretty good number.

S: Sizable.

G: Yes, it's pretty big.

S: With OEA, that's something that's often thought of as K-12. How does higher ED fit into it?

G: It's sometimes doesn't. It's not always perfect. There's the higher education lobbying group that NEOA pays close attention to. So there is a voice that is put forward to us. I think you're going to be talking with Vern Haynes and he can speak to that very well, because he's been active in that for a long time. I know that, when I went to the membership assemblies in Cleveland and then in the one in Columbus, there weren't a lot of voices from higher education talking. I'm not sure if that was their fault or our fault. I'm not sure if we just didn't make it clear enough that we needed to be heard. A lot of the issues had to deal with K-12 because they're in such rough shape, in Ohio in particular. It was useful for me to hear just how hard things are for the K-12 teachers because, although I have some in class, I don't always see them and I don't hear the traumas that they're facing with their school boards and with cutbacks, so it's useful. Our voices are not always heard as loudly as they might be, but then it might be our fault for not getting active enough.

S: But, overall, you think when the union needs OEA, they're there?

G: They certainly have. We got a wonderful local rep., Gary Carlisle, has been wonderful. He answers all our questions and answers very quickly. He's been really terrific about getting us resources. So, in that way, locally, it's been just wonderful. Good legal help, altogether terrific.

S: When would you need that legal help?

G: It pitches in on different cases. Sometimes in grievances, sometimes in negotiating when we're trying to work out the legalities of different things we want to propose, we have questions that go forward to the lawyers. Gary approves. He's very good. If he can't answer it and thinks he needs legal input, he's willing to do that. It doesn't happen frequently, but there is sometimes when you just need someone else's legal statement "This will fly" or "This won't fly" so that you don't get stopped and waste time.

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

G: Each union bargains individually.

S: Now, do you have certain issues that you watch out for each other that you know you want to adjust?

G: Health care in particular, I think, especially this time. I suspect it's a little different with each negotiation, especially depending what issues were under fire. The health care has become a real flash point. We're pretty much on alert that they want us to pay a greater percentage of our health care benefits. I think all of us are in line watching for that and trying figure out how to deal with that. That's this year's big issue where everyone is trying to talk to each other and hold it all together and make sure we all know what's going on from union to union.

S: Could you discuss the current state of the faculty and union?

G: In terms of . . . ?

S: Do you feel it's succeeding, is everyone acting together? Anyway you want to discuss it.

G: Sure. I think that we don't have as much active participation from the membership as we should. It's hard to get them to the meetings; it's hard to get their voices heard. We have a list serve that goes out to the membership who are enrolled in it, so that our voices are heard that way. A lot of times, they'll put something on the list serve and they'll talk to each other that way, so we get some interaction from that. Typically, right before a negotiation, we get more activity; more people start coming to the meeting; more people are paying attention. So, hopefully, we have a meeting next week, an end-of-chapter meeting, so we'll see. This is negotiations, and we're coming up on the elections of officers so we're hoping that people will come and participate in that conversation. So, in that way, maybe we could do better. In other ways, the people who are on all the committees have worked really hard and that's another way to measure activity, whether we were able to find people to fill the positions in all the committees. They've been very good about doing what they've been asked to do, very intelligent, and thoughtful. That's a lot of people. We've got a lot of different committees, but those have been good. In that way, it's really working out. The negotiating team has been working together really well. It looks like we have a pretty good arrangement. We at least have a way of talking to the administration right now, so there's line of communications. So, in that way, it's really solid. I mean, there is room for improvement; maybe there always is. It's hard to get people who are really, really busy to come to more meetings. That's, maybe, our biggest challenge right now.

S: Now, acting on negotiating team as vice-president, those are both unpaid positions?

G: Right, right.

S: So, why do you do it?

G: I decided it was time to get involved with the union since I've benefited from the union for all these years. I needed another way of understanding how YSU works, so that's kind of a selfish reason to do it, but as a faculty member you only see the university from a fairly narrow range. You see your students; you know you're obligated to grade papers; you get stuck on committees, but you don't really know how this place functions. By being a department head for a year, I saw from one angle because I was in administration for a year. By doing it this way, I see it more multi-dimensionally, which is actually better. I see the interactions between the different unions, not just within YSU, but across the area because we meet with monthly meeting with their union membership from the whole vicinity. That's really terrific; you kind of get a better sense of how it works, and who the faces are, and it helps you figure out how to get things done, and participate in getting things done so you're not just a passive member who complains a lot, but do something.

S: So you kind of get a sense of how the pieces of the puzzle all fit together?

G: Yeah, sort of understand it better and sort of help, maybe, solve a few little places where the edges need to be scraped off. I've been around long enough to know you can't say, "It's all wrong and I'll fix it!" I know that's not it. We need to target some things, like this year we're all staring at health care. It's like taking one thing maybe you could help at least preserve or help work better is at least a useful thing. It makes me feel like I'm contributing.

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

G: I think a voice that is inescapable. At the other universities, my friends who work at other universities, the faculty can be ignored. The voices of the secretaries and accountants and so forth can be ignored. If they're not unionized, they don't have to really listen, except federal law. Other than that, they're free to pay what they want, give raises when they want, however they chose to do it, and that's dangerous. I think that's very dangerous. At YSU, there's a voice that comes in all directions. All the different unions have different ways of communicating with the administration. It's much different than if they didn't have that representation. Since it's so thoroughly unionized, the administration has to get use to it all together, so there's not just one big group not unionized and a bunch of us are. They have to deal with all of us as a unionized group.

S: You're not going anywhere.

G: I don't think so.

S: How are the unions protecting YSU employees today?

G: All kinds of ways. I've sort of addressed that a little bit already. The health care, as I said, I think is probably our biggest place right now. We have really good benefits, and I hope that the unions will help preserve those. The domestic partners part that got in on the faculty one was, I think, a good move. I don't know if it will survive legal attacks from the state, but we're sure hoping, and we're hoping we can expand that so that it covers more people. The raises that we've got are much better than the cost of living and much better than our colleagues across the country, so that's been good. I think the grievance help, the aid on grievances, has been significant, and I think in some ways it helps the administration because we're not always blocking. We're trying to make things run better. So it's not always just, "Get your hands off our people," but it's also how do we make things work out better for the students, particularly for the students, and have the membership do their job un-abused.

S: Could you discuss the domestic partners issue? Could you tell me about that?

G: Sure. The faculty part of YSU, the YSU OEA, signed an MOU, memorandum of understanding to go to the Board of Trustees to extend benefits to gay partners in particular, domestic partners. They have to pay a 10% co-pay monthly, which turns out

to be about \$50 a month, which we don't have to pay, so that was the one sticky point. The married or the singles don't pay that, but gay couples have to, that was a problem for us. But that was the only we could get them to sign it, so we agreed to that so that they extended those benefits. Then the state of Ohio passed, they voted against gay partners having those rights. I think we'll survive the onslaught. There were several other major universities that extended these rights at about the same time, and they're all kind of going forward as a single unit to basically fight against this imposition. So we hope that they won't do anything to our benefits. They don't cost the university that much, actually, so they can't use a cost thing against them. Just, please leave them alone, don't hurt them.

S: Now, with domestic partners, you said gay partners, could I bet just with a man and a woman living together as well, but not married?

G: Not on the one we signed. The domestic partners we signed was specifically for gay partners. I, personally, this isn't me speaking for the union, I wish everyone should have insurance; I don't think it should be a real issue, but it costs a lot of money. The university balked when the last negotiations proposed that it should be exactly that, any partners living together, that made the university very nervous because it could cost the university quite a considerable amount of money, and that kind of broke apart that part of the discussion. This time around, they were willing to think of it, on the argument that heterosexual couples could get married; they have that option. So they aren't eliminated forever from having health benefits, so that was why we were willing to sign it. You're right; I think everyone should have health insurance; it shouldn't be a question at all. In fact, Canada seems really smart. That national health care thing. It was an uncomfortable compromise, but we needed to do something to help our members who are in that position.

S: Overall, how would you rate the success of the faculty union?

G: I think we're very successful, I think, in that we've been able to protect ourselves very well, especially through the 90s and now into the 2000s, when there is cutback after cutback after cutback after cutback. We've managed to not lose ground radically, whereas a lot of my colleagues at other universities have lost ground. We've actually gained ground. We're no longer ranked dead last in the state or right there by community colleges in our income. What the faculty earns are closer, not quite there in the middle, but closer to the middle, which is probably what YSU faculty should be. We're still below it a bit, but we're making good headway, which is astonishing in a time when you're getting \$10 million cuts and \$5 million cuts year after year after year. I think the union has done very well with that, protect our healthcare so far, when everyone else at other schools is paying considerable amounts of money, sometimes hundreds of dollars a month to keep their healthcare, so they've done very well. I think there is always more we can do, but they've actually done a very good job.

S: Speaking of more that can be done, what do you hope the union will achieve in the future?

G: Probably, one thing is to keep going to keep trying to gain ground, so that we do achieve as best we can the middle, or maybe a little bit above middle, percentage, keep a little bit ahead of cost of living, which is really hard right now because of cutbacks. I think we could do a better job of helping our members have a voice, more of the members have a voice, try to get the quiet people more involved, hear their voices a little bit better, get more of them involved in the union and in the committees. I know Michael has tried really hard to do that, and other presidents have tried to do that, to bring in people who are just new and haven't really thought about being on committees and doing more of that would be good. I think maybe that this particular union hasn't done much within the state level. We need to get more involved with the state and national levels. We've been working so hard locally at YSU itself that we've haven't spent as much time, probably, with the large organization. I think we probably could. I think ACE does a better job of that than we do. They've been getting more involved in the state and national level than we have, so that's just our part of the union, not the overall part.

S: That concludes my questions; is there anything else you'd like to add?

G: Nope, I don't think so.

S: Thank you for your time, and this concludes the interview.