

Jean A. Eilers

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Tape 1, Side 1

2011 August 10

CM: This is August 10th, 2011. And so, Jean, would you like to begin by identifying yourself?

EILERS: Yes, I am Jean Eilers, and I was born here in Portland, Oregon at St. Vincent's Hospital (good old Providence hospital), [on] October 28th, 1940, and my parents lived down on about 8th and [Northeast] Tillamook at the time. Although I don't know exactly when we moved, all my beginning memories were from [Northeast] 22nd Avenue between Siskiyou and Stanton, and that's where we lived. I have most recently been a union organizer, and I retired as of January 1. I was an organizer; my main role was outreach to the community, so that's the beginning.

CM: S.E.I.U. 49. [Service Employees International Union].

EILERS: Yes, right, correct.

CM: Which is how we made our acquaintance.

EILERS: Correct, right.

CM: So, what do you remember about your grandparents, parents, family life?

EILERS: When I think of grandparents, probably the first person I think of is my grandfather on my mother's side, and his name was E.H. Deery, and he owned Multnomah Meat Market all the time that I knew him on 18th and Burnside, West Burnside, the current location of McDonald's, [Laughs] which would have him roll over in his grave. But I have pictures and memories of being in that meat market, and my grandfather was known as the "Bard of B Street" because he would write poems which he would hand out to the customers with his meat at various times. They weren't great poetry but nonetheless, his poetry, which I found a poem he wrote for me actually much later that had to do with we had given him a rose (he loved to grow roses), and actually that's a whole memory of going to the beach to pick up seaweed with my grandparents and then coming back 'cause he tended his rose garden with seaweed. He was born in Rosstown, which is a [seaside village] in the south of County Donegal, and...

CM: In Ireland?

EILERS: Right, right, in Donegal. And we went there last summer actually, and the beach is so like the Oregon beaches that I'm sure our trips to the beach to pick up seaweed were based on his own growing up in this beach town, so. He was also – the other big thing about my grandfather was he had been the president of the Ancient Order of Hibernians¹, which is this Irish group, and the – he was in charge of building a building for

¹ Ancient Order of Hibernians is an Irish Catholic fraternal organization founded in 1836.

them, which is on [Northeast] Russell just off of M.L.K. [Martin Luther King, Jr. Boulevard] and today is, I think it's the Wonder Ballroom; it's a ballroom at this point.

CM: Russell and M.L.K.

EILERS: Right. And recently they revived the Ancient Order of Hibernians, and they call it the E.H. Deery Chapter of Hibernians, after my grandfather.

CM: How do you spell Deery?

EILERS: D-e-e-r-y. So, he was fairly prominent. But I remember him as joking, he would – my aunt, he didn't drive, and my aunt would pick him up from work and he would drop off the meat at our house. He'd run up the stairs, open the door, throw the meat in, and throw 50-cent pieces for my sister and [me] on the floor. [Laughs] And that was a certain amount of ritual from my grandfather. The other thing I remember about my grandfather is every holiday when we were having a meal it was my sister's job to say to him, "Mmm, this is good meat, must be from Fred Meyer." And my grandfather would chuckle over this ritual joke.

CM: Because he supplied Fred Meyer?

EILERS: No, because it was the competition. [Laughs] Right. People should be going to the meat market, not the grocery store to buy your meat.

CM: So he would chuckle. [Laughs]

EILERS: Yes, right. So, that was my grandfather. My grandmother was much quieter; she was from Ireland also, from Galway, County Galway from [Loughrea] (I think is the name of the town she was from). She had a sister who lived at the beach [Gleneden Beach],

which was kind of a destination when we'd go to the beach for the seaweed, Aunt Sissy. And she had another sister, Aunt Agnes, who lived in New York, who'll be part of the story later on. She had brothers, too, but I never knew them and never really even had all those connections. I think there may have been other sisters, too, but they weren't people that I knew. So, that's the grandfather on my mother's side. Grandparents on my father's side, I have a whole family tree. I have a letter from would have been my great, great-grandfather (I think?), who gave a kind of history of how they came to America and why they came.

CM: From where?

EILERS: From Holland actually. They were from Prussia, had moved to Holland, and then came from there. They were millers, and, anyway, then they got to this country, and my father's father was actually born in Chicago I believe, and then came out here. And he may have worked for P.G.E. [Portland General Electric] or something like that. And we didn't know him well. He was sick and my memory basically of – was very little of him. My grandmother on my father's side, Nellie, was very warm and loving, and when we stayed with her she would warm the milk, which was, like, terrible to drink warm milk [Laughs], but nonetheless it was something she didn't want us to have this cold milk, so. And my father had an older sister and two younger brothers, and then fortunately – when we knew them and met them – but my father died when I was 10, and as a result we didn't have a lot of connection with them, and I wasn't as close to those cousins as I would like to be. On my mother's side, my mother had three sisters and only one of her sisters had a child, Billy, and in many ways I'm still close to Billy, who now lives at Lake Chelan, [Washington], and runs, in the winter snowmobiles, and in the summer all those noisy things on lakes (skis, boats and other river kind of boats) he rents out too. [Laughs] So, okay, I've sort of rambled through these people.

CM: What was the name – you were born Jean?

EILERS: Jean Anne Eilers.

CM: So, that is the name that you've kept all your life.

EILERS: Right.² Well, except for the period when we were in the convent, we took "nun names," but otherwise yes. Right.

So, my father was George Edward Eilers. And he was very warm and very affectionate, and sort of a sports figure. When he died, that was sort of what was in the newspaper was "Sports figure George Eilers died." And we only knew him as he refereed football and basketball and listened on the radio to baseball games and kept score all the time. But everybody in town – to us it seemed everybody in town – knew my father. We'd be walking down the street and people would always say, "Hi, George," and...

CM: His occupation?

EILERS: Well, in the end he sold sporting goods for J.E. Haseltine Company, which was fitting. He traveled to places like Medford and The Dalles in selling these sporting goods. But there was a time when he worked for my grandfather in the meat market, and during the War one of my earliest memories is we would go down to the train station because he was driving the baggage cart, the tractor that pulled the baggage cart. And my memory is that was associated to the War but he didn't go off to war but somehow this service he was doing, somehow, [and it was related to his flat feet!]

CM: I remember the question I was going to ask about your grandparents from Ireland. Do you know why they came to this country?

² Addition from Eilers: "My baptismal certificate says Eugenia Anne Eilers! I think that was the priest's decision. And except for Pud, which was a nickname my sister gave me. It came from 'What's your name?' 'Puddin' tane. Ask me again and I'll tell you the same.'"

EILERS: Well, my grandfather, I believe, was part of the whole immigration, the whole emigration, really, from Ireland, and my guess is he came and probably sent back money. He certainly kept in touch with – and went back actually probably a couple of times, but he definitely kept in touch with his, eventually, his niece and nephew, who were not married but lived in the house my grandfather had grown up in as well.

CM: Do you know if they came straight to Portland or were there steps along the way?

EILERS: You know, I think he came to Portland, and what I don't know is if there was some other relative or there were people from the town. When he came, he was, like, 19, and he drove a cart delivering – you know, with a horse-and-buggy kind of cart – delivering meat. So, that's, I think, how he got in the meat business; in fact, I'm sure it is. There's a letter that I have actually that my grandfather sent back to his niece and nephew in Ireland, but it's an essay my cousin Billy wrote, and he interviewed my grandfather to write this essay for school about his life. And so, it really tells the story of how he came and drove the cart and then eventually was taught the trade, and then had his own market.

CM: Do you still have that essay?

EILERS: I do, I do. We'll pull it out at some point. Yeah, right, yeah. It's a great – I guess it's in there probably. Right.

CM: Your mother?

EILERS: So, I talked about my father, right, and my mother – it would be interesting. She went to St. Mary's, and I don't actually know whether she graduated or not. There's always the story about how she hid behind the piano to get out of some class and got a splinter. [Laughs]

CM: [Inaudible].

EILERS: [Laughs] Or the wall or something. And the other thing about the piano was later at the Madeleine and taking piano lessons and my regular teacher wasn't there and there was an older nun visiting, and I was, anyway, doing my little piano lesson, and she said, "Mmmph, mmph, you're *just* like your mother. You have *no* rhythm." [Laughs]

CM: That was great encouragement!

EILERS: That's right, exactly. So, anyway...

CM: St. Mary's is downtown?

EILERS: [Yes]. Same place it was when my mother went there. And when *she* went there it was first grade through high school, and I think all her sisters went there. I'm sure my – Mary, who's the one just older than she is, went there, but more than likely all four of the girls went there. So, if she worked for some period of time [after high school and before she was married]. She married my father in, I think, like, 1936. She was born in 1906, so she was 30, so a little bit older than you would think. She didn't work [after she was married] (as was typical of the times), and at some point she was president of the mother's club at the school.

CM: The Madeleine.

EILERS: Yeah, the Madeleine. She always took a nap. [Laughs] Is my memory. She baked cookies, and my friends and I – we had one of those houses, you know, where you could walk all the way around; you'd go from the living room through the hallway to the kitchen to the dining room back to – and we'd march around and take a cookie every time we passed the kitchen. [Laughs] The other thing that was interesting (this just occurred to

me). My parents' friends were mostly other Catholic families that we associated with either through church or because of the school and knowing people. To some degree people my father worked with were friends of the family, too. Whereas for us, our best friends in many ways when we were little, were the neighborhood kids, and it was sad (according to Catholic theology) that they weren't Catholic, because they weren't going to heaven like us. [Laughs] It's just outrageous when I think about it, but they were our friends and we knew their families because we spent time in their homes. And there was one other Catholic family, but the others were – one family, they were the Episcopalians, another family were Lutheran, the others down the street I'm not sure if they went to any church. But we played, you know, baseball in the street, we did tag, we did hide-and-go-seek, we did kick-the-can. We'd put on plays, we were forever putting on plays and making our parents come and watch them.

CM: Where does that come from? Were there plays in school that were the inspiration for this? Or just imagination of children?

EILERS: Yeah, right! I *think* it was just imagination. We may have attended plays; I don't feel like it's foreign that we saw plays, but we definitely – anyway, we did that whole play thing, a lot of that. And it's memories. When I've seen those childhood friends, that's the thing we all remember, these plays that we put on.

CM: Did you put them on for your parents?

EILERS: Oh, yeah, and probably charged 'em! [Laughs] A nickel or something.

CM: Do you remember the subjects of the plays? What were they about?

EILERS: I don't – I have a picture actually that shows, you know, us in the different roles that I can dig up, but...

CM: Was your sister involved in them?

EILERS: She would be in the plays. But my sister was older, one of the oldest people on our block.

CM: What was her name?

EILERS: Judy, my sister's name is Judy. She, as I said, was three years older than me. She was, I think, you know, that old older-younger sort of thing, and the whole economics of the time. It's interesting, I think, because my sister got a used bike, and I got a new bike, you know, three years later. And I'm assuming that had to do with the family having a little more money; they could afford to buy a bike.

CM: Later on.

EILERS: I don't remember, you know, feeling the stress of economics, but there wasn't the sense that we had a lot of money, and when my father died (and that was in 1951) that created a kind of situation of concern about money, which I think is one of the reasons when my cousin, after his father died and then his mother died, we went to live with them, and then we would rent our house. And I think that that economics was a whole piece of that. It wasn't spoken, because there wasn't – my parents certainly and my mother certainly didn't [tell] the stories and the concerns going on.

The other thing my parents did and I remember, is they played bridge. They had all their friends over for these bridge parties, and we were supposed to be in bed, but we could hear them talking [Laughs]. We were in bed.

CM: Where exactly did you go to live on the West side after your...

EILERS: I lived on Cornell Road, so it's Northwest Portland, and it was – my cousin's father was a doctor, and they had moved to a big house. And they had moved to a big house (I think that's Cornell Road when you would go up Lovejoy to the top and turn right). And he was a doctor. So, when he died, my aunt moved to a smaller house on Cornell Road, just further out. It was the first house after the sidewalks ended when Cornell then goes off up and goes through the tunnels and whatnot. So, that's where we lived [with my cousin, Billy Sharkey] – the Kings Heights bus was what serviced that area there.

CM: And did you get the bus to Madeleine School?

EILERS: I did, because I was in eighth grade when we moved there, and I did take the bus to the Madeleine for that last year.

CM: Did you or your family have any perception of the quality of neighborhood (like “this is a poor neighborhood” or “rich neighborhood” or something like that), in either place that you lived?

EILERS: I think that they – I don't remember that. I mean, I think when we lived on 22nd between Siskiyou and Stanton, our house was probably smaller than my friends' houses, and it seemed like, you know, the streetcar ran down the middle. We put our pennies on the streetcar tracks. [Laughs] And I felt that our neighbors had more money than we did, but it wasn't a problem. And then when we moved to the Westside, there certainly was a great sense of a more well-to-do area, and...

CM: Did it affect your behavior, or anything like that?

EILERS: I don't think so. That was the year before my mother died, and my mother was sick, like, in January, and she died in June, [1955]. And so, and I still was going to the Madeleine, and I had these two friends, John Hunt and Mike Cusick. Now, Mike Cusick's

mother had remarried Jerome Margulis, the jeweler, so they certainly were of a different class than we were. [Laughs] John Hunt was a member of, oh, his mother was part of the Peter Murphy family, the Peter Murphy Lumber Company.

CM: Oh, okay. I'm not familiar with that.

EILERS: They lived on the Westside, and then I went to high school with some of the Murphys (but the Hunts were another branch of the Murphys) – anyway, John Hunt and Mike Cusick were my friends in the neighborhood. And I don't know if I should tell this story for posterity, but we one night went out, and there was a party going on in this – you know, this is quite the fancy neighborhood and the fancy cars and whatever – and we let the air out of the tires of most of the cars. And so, and I'm sure John and Mike will remember this, too. Of course, we weren't around when they came out to drive their cars home, and I'm sure they were quite upset because there was a policeman who knocked at the door one day... [Laughs]

[End of Tape 1, Side 1]

Tape 1, Side 2
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EILERS: So, anyway, I do remember saying, "Oh, no, I knew nothing about this."
[Laughs] and hoped he believed me and went on.

CM: No repercussions from any of that.

EILERS: Right. The only reason I know that – a cousin of mine, Michael (and this would have been two years ago maybe) told me how he had met Mike Cusick, and the one thing he remembers was this incident of the letting the air out of the tires that we had done.

CM: Early renegades.

EILERS: That's right. So, the other thing about our neighborhood was there was always the story of the family down the street that had made all their money on Prohibition. In the same neighborhood.

CM: In Northwest?

EILERS: Yes, in Northwest. And I don't remember the name of the people at all, but that was that neighborhood, right.

CM: Did you go to the Madeleine school because it was close by?

EILERS: Yes, when I was little, it was our parish; it was the whole thing of people going, right. Catholics went to their neighborhood school. And that was – interesting culture of – again, what do I remember? We went to public schools for kindergarten (which is interesting), so we went to Alameda for kindergarten, and then in first grade we would go to the Catholic school.

CM: Any particular reason for this?

EILERS: The Catholic schools didn't have kindergarten.

CM: Oh, okay.

EILERS: And I think that was why.

CM: And the culture. Were you going to say the culture of Madeleine School?

EILERS: You're right. So, going to the Madeleine, my sister had been there three years ahead, and I had tagged along many a time to school or to the playground or to whatever. And so, when I went to first grade – well, here's another story, don't know how it fits into anything. But when I was born, they didn't have a name immediately for me, and so they asked my sister, you know, "What's her name?" And she would say, "Puddin' tane, ask me again and I'll tell you the same." [Laughs] [Inaudible] So, I was called "Pud"³ until I went to first grade, and the good sisters were not going to call me Pud; there was no saint named Pud. And so, then I became Jean, and I insisted then I was Jean, and that was the end of Pud.

CM: That's a long time to be called something that would not be your name ever again.

EILERS: Right. [Laughs]

CM: Did anyone ever call you that?

³ Pronounced to rhyme with "hood."

EILERS: Well, a long time after – I don't remember it. I think part of the motivation for changing, there was somebody who called me Pud once. (That's not who I am.) So, anyway, first grade changed all of that. The other thing about first grade is there were – we were either – for music class, we had our regular class and then you went to music class, and there were the Bluebirds, who were most of the girls; then there were the Redbirds and that was most of the boys, and then there were the Yellowbirds, and there was Richard Harr, who was hard of hearing and me. We were Yellowbirds, and so we would go color when it was time for music in the second grade. [Laughs]

CM: Because?

EILERS: Because I just couldn't carry a tune. Again, it certainly was a memory of being singled out, and it's interesting the importance of music in the school for some reason. So, anyway, that was...

CM: Well, my impression is that it is in the Catholic Church, too. Music is considered important. As a non-Catholic, my impression is that it is.

EILERS: Right, right. And, I don't know. Madeleine School had a high school prior probably to, maybe even prior to my starting first grade it would no longer have the high school. I'm not exactly sure when it stopped. But I wonder if some of the music wasn't the high school, and I would suspect they had a chorale and lots of things. They had music rooms. There was a whole section upstairs of music rooms that – for practice, and then you'd have your lessons with the nun. And my Aunt Rose, my mother's oldest sister, paid for probably my sister and I. I don't remember for my sister, but certainly for me. She paid for music lessons, and then I got caught playing with my yo-yo in the practice room [Laughs], and so that was the end of my music lessons.

CM: Were you disappointed, or relieved, or...

EILERS: That's a good question. I obviously was not getting the impression that I was a great musician, so probably somewhat embarrassed that I got caught [Laughs]. But, you know, didn't worry about the piano. We had a piano in our house, and probably dinked around with it but not much else.

CM: I liked that story you told last week about the world of that time was divided into the Catholics and the public schools. Tell that story.

EILERS: Oh, right, right. We had *such* a thing, I mean, 'cause it was so clear we went to the Catholic school, had all these friends who were public school – the public school kids, we saw them walk *past* our school, all of that. So, I do recall being downtown with my mother and having to go to the bathroom and my mother about to take me and my asking, "Is it a public bathroom or is it a Catholic bathroom?" And I don't know how she – it would be interesting to know how she responded, I don't remember. You know, I think she probably told the story, is why I remember it so well. But it was very much how the world was divided at that time.

CM: Did you have an impression at the time that one was better than the other? The Catholic school?

EILERS: I think we thought we were better. And it was confusing for me because I wasn't better than my friends that I played with on the street, and I do remember that being confusing. Maybe those other public school kids that I didn't know weren't as good, but these I knew, and so that was hard; that seemed strange.

CM: There was probably tuition for Madeleine and later on in high school, too? Was it a fact that money became a concern?

EILERS: You know, tuition in those days, and there may not have been tuition in the elementary school, I don't remember. But it may have been taken care of by the Sunday collections, and the nuns taught in the school. We had all nuns, there weren't any lay people in my grade school. And so, there's the sense that the nuns were free. [Laughs] You know, they obviously had living expenses and whatnot, but it wasn't the same kind of concern of paying people a living wage. So, that was grade school. In high school there was tuition and – my memory is it was about \$100 a year, and my first year I won a scholarship. And then at the end of my freshman year my mother died, and so they granted a continuance of the scholarship (is my memory). And I don't know if I ever paid then, for the rest of high school or not.

CM: After your mother died, did you continue living on the West Side?

EILERS: After my mother died, we went to live with my Aunt Mary, who was just two years older than my mother, and she had married, had only married in 1950, and we should definitely put this picture – ooh! I forgot to [Inaudible] – we'll just turn this. [Sounds of paper rustling] [Laughs]

CM: Okay, so this picture is of?

EILERS: It's my grandparents' 50th wedding anniversary, and this is at the house on Cornell that my Uncle Bill (who is the doctor, Doctor Sharkey), and my Aunt Frances. It was their house and my Cousin Billy lived there. And then this is my grandfather and my grandmother. This is the oldest, Aunt Rose, who was married to Joe Meagher, and this is my mother and this is my father, and this is my sister Judy and this is my Aunt Mary.

CM: And this is you.

EILERS: That's me. Don't miss the skirt! [Laughs]

CM: Yes, draped across the laps of your grandparents.

EILERS: [Laughs] That's right. And sitting in the prime position, right? I'm the youngest. Which is the point of privilege you get for being the youngest.

CM: Yes, wonderful, clear picture.

EILERS: Again, that whole family placement stuff. But the interesting thing about this picture, and I'm thinking this picture is probably about 1948, maybe a little earlier, not much.

CM: You look about eight years old there.

EILERS: Right. But – now, my Aunt Rose died on her birthday, April 1st, 1950, and her husband had died a couple years before that, and then my father died September 11th, 1951, and my uncle died in November of 1951.

And then my aunt died, which was probably 1953 – I actually have all these dates someplace. And that's when we went to live with Billy. So this is the only set of people in this picture, my grandmother, my grandfather, my Aunt Mary, my sister Judy, me and Billy, who are left in that short period of time.

CM: Just a couple of years later this picture would not be the same at all. [Sighs] That was a big hit for your family.

EILERS: Right, right, it was, and it was – After my uncle died, then Rose went to live with Frances and Bill, and then she died there, and then my father [died] in September and this was November, so that was short time.

CM: Might be nice to have a copy of...

EILERS: Yes, I do. We have many copies of those [Inaudible] [Laughs]. But definitely get a copy of that. [Laughs] Did I completely screw this up?

CM: [Inaudible] in connection with [Inaudible]. So, high school?

EILERS: So, high school. My sister went to Holy Child. I mean, there were some question. There were two Catholic girls' high schools, St. Mary's and Holy Child, and my sister decided to go to Holy Child, and my father felt that would be good for her; it was a smaller school than St. Mary's and thought that would be good for Judy. She seemed shyer, a little more reticent (they didn't worry about me that way as much). So, anyway, Judy paved the way through Holy Child, the high school.

CM: Where is that?

EILERS: Holy Child is [Northeast] 54th and Sandy. It is now the Southeast Asian Vicariate.

CM: Oh, oh, it's a beautiful building!

EILERS: Yes, right, right. The thing about the building, Carolyn, and the thing I remember today (I certainly didn't then), but today. Right across the street was the restaurant Coon Chicken Inn. And the thing that I'm just struck by is, you know, you grow up in a place, and it didn't faze me to have that restaurant across the street. And we also were very aware, and I think this is looking back you become aware that – You know, we lived on 22nd, but Martin Luther King Boulevard was Union Avenue, and the other side of Union Avenue was where the Black [people] lived. And my mother referred to the little children as pickaninnies, and I mean, this was a whole piece. And the first time I ever had kind of a close time to be with an African American was – I was in high school until my

mother had died, and I was living with my aunt and uncle, but I went to the kitchen caper (I forget what we called it) at the Girl Scout camp up in wherever the Girl Scout camp was.

CM: Up towards Mount Hood or Sandy area?

EILERS: I think it's over in Vancouver over on the Washington side, (I forget) anyway.

CM: Okay.

EILERS: But it – but one of the other kitchen helpers was African American. It was the very first time to actually even *have* any interaction.

CM: Did you enjoy each other's company, or how was that?

EILERS: You know, there was an element of "she's different," and I think we – I was there with my friend, and we spent a lot of time [together]. So, but I do remember being very conscious that this shouldn't be this way, and what do we do about it?" (Kind of thing) But not much more, and there just was not much other involvement. There certainly wasn't anyone in my high school or my grade school that I recall. So, that was a whole era of...

CM: Yes, this is similar with me, too, yeah. [Sighs]

EILERS: Until we went to college, and then Elgin Baylor⁴ was the hero – the basketball team at Seattle University.

CM: So, in high school, did you begin to start making plans or wondering what your future would be like?

⁴ Elgin Gay Baylor (1934 - 2021) was an American professional basketball player, coach, and executive.

EILERS: Well, you know, it's interesting. I think, I lived with my aunt and uncle, and they were not people who talked a lot, and my uncle was not a comfortable person to be around particularly, either. So, but I was very conscious that it was my job to – I was in charge – there wasn't anybody in charge of me but me, and that was a bit scary, at the age. How to – I'm in charge of whether I'm good or not, and what does that mean and how do I deal with that? Now, I had lots of friends and lots of families of friends who were always including me in many things we did, and, you know, it was a normal kind of high school – what we did. But it's interesting to me; there was very much for me a sense that I had to be in charge in taking care of myself.

CM: Did you feel much support from teachers? Does anybody seem to kind of be important to your life?

EILERS: A hah. I did well in school, and so you get a certain amount of attention for doing well, and when I was a sophomore, however, there was Mother Mary Kevin was the science teacher, and she – I guess when I was a junior, I was taking (that would be right), and so I was talking to my neighbor in class and she says, "Mm-mmm, we let you get away with this 'cause your mother died, but you're not to get away with it now!" [Laughs] I was to shape up.

CM: Did you have to wear a uniform?

EILERS: We wore uniforms.

CM: All through school, grade school?

EILERS: Grade school and high school. I don't remember minding wearing uniforms, mostly because you didn't have to think about it, and then you weren't comparing what somebody else was wearing, what you were wearing, and our uniforms were fairly

comfortable, seems to me. They were funny looking if you go back to 'em. The things we wore for gym class in high school were very silly looking, but comfortable. So, I would say there was some attention – The nuns wanted people – certainly marked out certain people to be, to invite them to come to the convent, “Why don't you join? Think about it?” Also, when I was a senior I was the Sodality president. Now, the Sodality was the club (sort of) for – it was dedicated to Mary, and I don't know what we did, quite frankly. [Laughs] I don't remember the group getting together to pray or whatever. It was just another student body officer role is (when I think about it) that existed, and so I was the Sodality president my senior year.

CM: This was a girls' school, right?

EILERS: All girls' school, [yes]!

CM: Madeleine also?

EILERS: No, Madeleine was boys and girls.

CM: So, was there any interaction? There must have been a boys' Catholic high school.

EILERS: Central Catholic existed, and yes, there were...

CM: Was there any interaction, shared resources or something?

EILERS: Oh, yeah. We did a couple of things. One was there was an interschool council for the student leadership. Groups, it was St. Mary's and Immaculata and Central and a school in Vancouver and Jesuit opened the year I was a junior, and so they were included. And one of the priests from Central led that, Father Emmett Harrington, who was a great person actually.

CM: Emmett Harrington?

EILERS: [Yes]. And then we went to the basketball games at Central and when we had dances (dances in those days were really bizarre). Like a tea dance you would have a little program, you filled it out ahead of time with who you were going to dance with, and then when the boys you'd meet at the school and you had to introduce them to this long line of nuns and the last nun in line would hand you a veil to go into the chapel and you'd go and make a chapel visit and then you would go to the dance. [Laughs]

CM: Had to be processed first. [Laughs]

EILERS: Oh, yeah, right, right. So, I'm trying to think about – it was a good place. Seems to me we did do some – I don't know if we went to visit senior citizens or we did some Saint Vincent de Paul charity work. Seems to me there were different things that we raised money or did events to sort of make ourselves aware of service in different ways.

CM: So time is getting – graduation is getting closer and closer. What is going to happen after that?

EILERS: So, I thought about entering the convent. And a lot of it was, some of it was certainly a security issue. I didn't want to live with my aunt and uncle forever and ever. I wasn't clear if there was any money or not, and was there money for college or not college, and we didn't talk about these things. And on the other hand, there seemed to be some – or at least I had in my mind that the nuns expected me to join the convent, and I certainly didn't want to do what was expected! [Laughs] So, it seemed to me like it was a late decision. I finally decided I wanted to go to Seattle University. I think I wanted to go to Gonzaga, but I didn't think I could get in (I don't know why).

CM: Gonzaga in Spokane.

EILERS: Yeah. So, I – and the other thing about going to Catholic colleges? Again, this whole Catholic culture, it just was a little bit a temptation for sin if you went to public colleges. It was not totally approved of, which played its role with me I think. Again, that sense of “I’m in charge of me and I’m going to be a good person and what are the things I’ve got to do to do that.” So, I did end up going to Seattle University for a year...

[End of Tape 1, Side 2]

Tape 2, Side 1
2011 August 10

CM: [Inaudible]. What's Bob's full name?

EILERS: Robert Neal Byrne. We dated a little bit but not seriously, and when I – so by the end of that year I sort of thought, “I need to make this decision, and I think I am going to do it, I'm going to go to the convent.” So, I made arrangements, came back and talked to the nuns here and made those arrangements, and then set on the course to go East because the Holy Child nuns, their novitiate was in Rosemont, Pennsylvania, which is just outside Philadelphia.

CM: Oh, and if one associates with that order, that's where you have to go?

EILERS: At that time, that was the only place to enter, and you entered with some other people. People from my class, there had been about four (I think three or four) who had entered the convent the year before, which would have been my class, so they were already back there. But when I went, there wasn't anybody else going from Portland, and so I ended up (what I did) was I flew to New York where my great-aunt, my grandmother's sister Agnes lived in New York and I stayed with her, and then she asked, “Now, are you sure you don't want me to take the train down to Rosemont with you?” “Oh, no, I'll be just fine.” [Laughs] And so, I have on a little green wool suit; I have brown gloves, I have a brown hat and (I'm sure) matching shoes or something to go on this trip to Rosemont. And it's boiling hot, it's, like, September 13th, I think, was the day we entered.

EILERS: About 1959 or so?

EILERS: That's right, 1959. And it's, you know, the East Coast's humidity and heat[Laughs], and there I am, on my way! So, anyway, I take the train from New York to Philadelphia; you change at the Central Station, get the Paoli local to go out to Rosemont.

On the train, like, every five minutes I say to the poor porter, “Is the next stop Rosemont?” [Laughs] “No, lady, I’ll tell you when we’re coming to Rosemont!” [Laughs] So, anyway, we finally got there. And I’m, like, so fearful that I’ll miss the stop and end up just going off into nowhere! You know, I had no backup plan for what do I do when I’m lost on the train. So, anyway, we get to Rosemont, and I think, “Okay, everything’s going to be fine, I’m going to recognize the nuns, wear the same habits that they wore, but I know it’s all going to be fine. So, sure enough, two nuns meet me at the train station, and I get off. But I don’t know them! And it’s, like, “Oh!” I mean, they’re very nice and welcoming, and I’m about to burst into tears.

CM: Oh, I’ll bet.

EILERS: And it’s, like, “Oh, my gosh, how can I do this?” And I’m biting my lip. By the time I arrive at Rosemont, the tears are flowing. And it’s a big deal; everybody’s arriving, but it’s a bigger deal because one of the people who’s entering the convent with me is Marlene Brownett. She has been the secretary to Bishop Sheen, Bishop Fulton J. Sheen⁵, who was the TV bishop. He had a TV program, so he was a very famous bishop. And she was entering – and he was coming, and so, all the nuns were aflutter and everything, and here’s this girl from Portland sobbing. [Laughs] And so,, what are they going to do with me? So they try everything. They bring out the people I’d gone to high school with, normally the sophomores don’t mix [Inaudible], they were trying everything...

CM: [Inaudible] [New?] people...

EILERS: And then finally they decided I was just helpless and so they send me to bed. And this dear nun brings me ginger ale and cookies, and it’s, like, “Ah, this is wonderful,

⁵ Fulton John Sheen (1895-1979) was an American Catholic bishop known for his preaching, especially his work on television and radio.

and I'm alone and I'm comfortable and I'm in bed" and, anyway, I missed Fulton Sheen.
[Laughs]

CM: Your sister, three years older, had she in the meantime gone on a whole separate track?

EILERS: So, my sister, a year after she graduated from high school and we were living at my Aunt Mary's, which was out in Raleigh Hills (that whole area out there), and she married in a year and had two children and then her husband left her and then I go off to the convent. So, that's a very sad part of my life in many ways that Judy didn't have my mother, and it was just was really hard. It was really hard, so she has these two little babies, and they move into our old house, the house we'd been renting that we had grown up in, so she lived there. But when her husband left her – and again this is part of that old Catholic culture, as well as I suspect it was even more so.

Divorce was a disgrace, and so, it was really hard for Judy to live in that neighborhood even though I'm sure people were kind. But you just internally feel all these things. So, she moved out of that neighborhood, and I missed most of that 'cause I'm off in the convent. And it's not – it's a hard life that Judy has. And by the time I'm back in Portland, which would have been 1966, no, 1967. It was hard for us to be close. I think she saw me as very judgmental just because I was a nun and so she held these feelings. So, when I eventually moved back to Portland after marrying [in 1982. Michela turned three shortly after.] We moved back in Portland, there were moments when [my sister and I] were close. By then though she was sick, really and she ended up having kidney failure and eventually chose to die, which was hard. She died in 1995, I think.

So, that was hard. It was interesting, you know, when you look in a family, the whole bicycle thing was one thing. But there was always – Judy and I might have an argument about something, believe me, I couldn't remember what the argument was about five minutes later, but Judy would *feel* these things. And so we were these two very different

personalities, you know, the picture of me in the center. There is a little bit of I got a lot more attention just being the younger kid (I think), so it makes me sad.

CM: Her two children are – were you ever in touch with them?

EILERS: Yeah. Her children – Linda lives in France, and then she graduated from Portland State, won a Fulbright to study in France with their – and married a French man and lives over there. She has two girls, one who's here this summer or this year actually. But Linda went through a lot but she's done well, and is good, and we visited her, which was nice last year when we went to Ireland and France. And then her son, Bobby lives in Salem area now. And he is hard to draw out and doesn't return phone calls much, and so, we're in touch but we don't see him as much as would be nice. So, they're both very good kids.

CM: So, you are back in the convent, just starting.

EILERS: Just starting the convent, right. So, the trauma of entering. And then, because I'd gone to school for a year, I didn't have to take all the courses that others were taking. And I worked in the high school office (the high school was kind of on this property near Rosemont). Rosemont College, which is a women's college, is on one side of the [road]. On the other side was the novitiate, and there were these old mansions, and they had changed the stable actually into where the postulants (postulants being the first year of convent life) lived. And so, anyway, it was very regimented, but you just assumed, you know, I knew all these nuns. They turned out okay; I'm sure they went through the same regimen. So, okay, we'll do this, too!

CM: Knowing as I do that you ended up doing a lot of teaching, did you begin to major in education at some point, either at Seattle or at the convent?

EILERS: At Seattle, I don't know if I'd even declared a major 'cause it was just first year, but I, if I did, it would have been history. I think I might have, and I know I took some history courses and whatnot. And we took some theology classes, and then a couple years – the first year of postulanship where we had some classes, probably religion classes together, and then I didn't have to take the regular classes that they were taking 'cause I'd had the college. And then the second year is a contemplative year, and it's much more spiritual training, and then the third year we actually had classes, which was called "normal school," the old term for a teacher college.

And we went out to the Catholic schools and actually did practice teaching and learned a little bit about teaching. The main teacher said, "Don't teach first grade, okay? If they ask you, just don't do it." And I think it's 'cause I used too-big words or said something, anyway, that didn't seem appropriate or suitable. Anyway, so then the next year we finish our training (so to speak) and we make first vows to become nuns and then we're assigned to a school. And we don't have degrees, we haven't finished college, all we had was this little bit of normal school. So, of course, I'm assigned first grade. [Laughs] At St. Leonard's Academy and the good part about it was an academy and so the class was small.

CM: In Philadelphia?

EILERS: In Philadelphia, right, and I taught and to this day I worry that Robert Tomasky and Vincent Falabella are somewhere in jail because I never taught them how to read.

CM: [Laughs] You never succeeded in teaching them how to read.

EILERS: I didn't. It weighs on my conscience forever. [Both laugh]

CM: And the names have certainly stuck with you.

EILERS: Absolutely, right, right. So anyway, that was my first year teaching. My next year teaching, which was 1963 – one of the things I remember about that first year though was the opening of the Vatican Council, and so the interest and learning about and talking about the fact that this Vatican Council was going to happen was just starting to be part of our world. And all the time we were teaching, but on Saturdays we attended college, and we went to – I think we went to Villanova, so when I was in Philadelphia I took classes at Villanova. And then during the summer we would take classes, so we were still working on our degrees.

But anyway, the next year I was assigned to Washington, D.C., and this is 1963. We get there, and probably we went to summer school and so probably late August we moved to our new assignment and so I went to D.C. and so I was...

CM: So, there was a group of you that went to D.C. that were assigned...

EILERS: Well, there were people already there, and I think I might have been the only one that year or there might have been one other [new person], I can't remember. But I do remember being there for Martin Luther King's Poor People's March⁶. But, again, the sad thing was, I remember there being just a bit of fear, and Mother Superior making sure the doors were locked instead of our going! But I do remember a Hold Child nun who taught in the college saying, "You all should go, you should be there!" but who was I, this brand-new nun to insist that we go do this. So, we missed it, other than being there, and I certainly remember having been there.

The other thing, of course, in 1963 was John F. Kennedy's assassination. So, a lot of the children who went to this Catholic school, which was right in the heart of D.C., were from the embassies or were senators' kids or otherwise Catholic people who were in D.C. So, when Kennedy was assassinated, we learned of it right away, and then there was concern because parents were coming to pick up their children to take them. And then we also, we spent a lot of time in front of the television watching that whole ritual.

⁶Poor People's March on Washington, was a 1968 effort to gain economic justice for poor people in the United States.

CM: Yeah. Were you in a role of having to explain to the children?

EILERS: You know, the Mother Superior came to the door and told me – the door, I was teaching third grade, but I don't think we were to tell the children because their parents for the most part were coming to pick them up, and the parents would want to be the ones to tell them, so. So, I don't remember that.

CM: But afterwards, you know, a few days later, there must have been talk in school about it or [Inaudible] handle it?

EILERS: I don't remember. I would think so, and as I say, we watched so much of the whole experience and presence, and we were on a street where we would hear the sirens go anytime the president's cars would go somewhere, so.

CM: These kids were all white?

EILERS: No, because there were many embassy kids. As a matter of fact, when they had sisters' feast day and the children did perform 'cause Sylva, who was from Spain, and Genina, who was from Coast Rica, sang *This Land Is My Land*. [Laughs] It was so funny. In their very Spanish accent, and not sure they knew all the words at all. And so, there was that integration, but, you know, this was in the heart of embassy-land; this was not the poverty area of Washington, D.C. at all.

So, that was 1963. And then the next year I was in California, taught at Assumption School, taught combined fifth and sixth grade.

CM: Is the emphasis of this order education? And do different orders have different emphases? For Holy Child it's education; it's just assumed, if you go to that convent, you'll be teaching?

EILERS: Right, right, and especially at that time. Now, it's not. People do it for much more of variety, but the founders of this order's a very interesting story, Cornelia Connelly⁷, people can look up and read, but she was a Philadelphian, not a Catholic, married an Episcopal minister who became a Catholic. They then went to Louisiana and she taught – he taught the school there, I think, in Grand Couteau, and she taught in a girls' school in Grand Couteau.

They had – ultimately they had five children. One of the children when they were living there died 'cause he was pushed by the dog into a vat of boiling sugar. So, I mean, she has this incredible history. Her husband then decides to be a priest, means she has to go be a nun and they go to Rome; they did this. Ultimately she's called by – and this is a time, Cardinal Newman, to come to England to – it's a kind of restoration of Catholicism in England and to open schools, found an order and open schools in England, and that's what she does. So, that's kind of the history of the order, and then the order eventually comes – sends nuns back to America.

And then there's a whole nother story. Her husband decides to leave the priesthood, and then sues in British courts to get her back, quite the story. Anyway, she stays, and found the order and leaves quite a legacy. So, anyway, teaching, so, I taught fifth and sixth grade in Pasadena and Assumption School, and next year I taught seventh and eighth grade, a combined seventh and eighth grade at the same school. The next year I came to Portland, I taught at St. Rose, lived at Holy Child, and...

CM: Where is St. Rose?

EILERS: St. Rose is right across the street from where Holy Child is. Up on 54th and Alameda is where St. Rose would be.

CM: So, Vatican II. [Inaudible. We want to get to that. So much time?]

⁷ Cornelia Connelly (1809 –1879) was the American-born founder of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus.

EILERS: Oh, yeah. Absolutely, right, right.

CM: Is that making people [Inaudible]? Is it possible to explain Vatican II in just a couple sentences? [Both laugh]

EILERS: Right, good question! So, it certainly sparked the conversations; it sparked different meetings in Rome, different meetings of the order when the order would get together and hold discussions. You know, the outward signs were changing, the habits and wearing much more secular dress, but there was much more discussion of the role of Catholics to be responsible, and the whole role in the world of service – not service but more justice, so much more justice-oriented. And heroes of mine and whom I saw live this out were Dorothy Day⁸ and Daniel Berrigan.⁹

And these were the conversations we had, and these, so – we taught school, but the mix with the nuns and the meetings and things we thought were important and the messages of living our lives came alive certainly with this background and the documents that came out of Vatican II. And when we would have meetings of the Holy Child Order back in the Philadelphia area – often in the summer there would be these big gatherings, we had some leaders from Vatican II, we had Ladislav Orsy,¹⁰ who – I'm just reading a book now about Vatic – a recent book – where he's talking about Vatican II; he's a real authority. We had Paul Molinari¹¹ and Peter Gumpel.¹² These were leaders out of Vatican II and had the most foremost understanding and thought and analysis of what's going on and what should be happening. So, it was a very energizing time to really be a part of and part about thinking what was going to happen.

⁸ Dorothy Day (1897–1980) was an American journalist, social activist and anarchist, a well-known political radical among American Catholics.

⁹ Daniel Joseph Berrigan S.J. (1921–2016) was an American Jesuit priest, anti-war activist, Christian pacifist, playwright, poet, and author.

¹⁰ Ladislav Orsy (born in 1921) is a canonical theologian, retired professor of canon law, and author of numerous books and articles in his specialty.

¹¹ Paul Molinari, S.J. was the author of a number of books about the canonization of saints in the Roman Catholic church

¹² Peter Gumpel (born in 1923) is a German Jesuit priest and Church historian.

So, after Portland, then I came back to Pasadena and taught in both Mayfield and then at Assumption, and then eventually at Cornelia Connelly High School and then back at Mayfield, and then I was on the Provincial Council and again all of this was a time of all of these good discussions. I went to Rome as part of the General Council delegation – I was an alternate. I wasn't the one that was supposed to go, I was the alternate. (And what year would that have been? It would have been probably about, oh, let's say 1972 maybe, 1971, 1972, something like that.) And so, the person who was a delegate, her father died, and so she came home and so then I had to go. And – funny memories. So, I had to get a passport to go and it was a Sunday, and Richard Reardon, who's later the mayor of Los Angeles (now at the time he was some lawyer, and his kids went to the Mayfield school), so he got us into whoever, called somebody in on a Sunday, I get my passport to go to Rome. [Laughs] So anyway, I go off to Rome for this council meeting. All those sort of interesting things, but...

CM: Was there some purpose, was there something you had to accomplish [as far as you were concerned?].

EILERS: Yeah, they were making decisions about changing rules. You know, again, a lot of it out of Vatican II then, that affected the rules. We had a rule book (which I actually still have, from the convent) of – that were going to be modified and changed and so there needed to be these discussions and et cetera bringing that about. Now, most of the Order considered me and even the person who went before me, we were young upstarts. You know, the older, more mature people should be making these decisions, not us young upstarts.

CM: Was there any contentiousness about some of these changes?

EILERS: There was, and in retrospect it's interesting. As I say, this sort of being labeled as a young upstart, because we were truly so excited about this new sense of

justice, and it was very energizing. But some read it as criticism of the years they had put in, and especially around their years of teaching and dedication and the lives they had lived. And we probably weren't very sensitive, you know, when I think back, could have done a much better job of validating what people had done and who they were. So, it *was* somewhat. Anyway, then, I remember, at any rate, somehow coming to "What am I going to do?" At this point I wasn't teaching anymore 'cause I was on what we call the Provincial Council. They had divided us, that's another thing. They had divided the United States into three provinces, so there was the Eastern Province (oh, I forget) oh, there was the New York Province, the Rosemont Province 'cause where the headquarters were but the Rosemont Province probably included (oh, where was it?) in Michigan or somewhere in the Midwest, Illinois, I guess it was. And then there was a Western Province, which was Oregon and California. And so, we were in the Oregon-California Province, and we were like the West. We were young and a much younger crew of people and whatnot.

So, anyway, I was on the Provincial Council for the West. And that gave me more time to think about what I wanted to do, so I spent a month in Toronto at a L'Arche community. L'Arche communities were founded by a man named Jean Varnier¹³ out of Canada. He founded it in France though, for mentally handicapped people who could then live in community. And his whole philosophy is "Who's to say who's handicapped?" You know, they have gifts of the heart that we certainly are handicapped in, and so he founded these homes that are still going today. We have, I think we have two (actually) homes here in Portland, one is Nehalem House and the community comes to St. Andrew's to church. And there's many, you know, young people volunteer (Jesuit volunteers) often are helping out in these communities. So, I spent a month there thinking maybe that would be good but...

CM: L'Arche communities? How do you spell that?

¹³ Jean Vanier (1928 –2019) was a Canadian Catholic philosopher and theologian.

EILERS: It's French, so it's L'A-r-c-h-e. But then, we had also (living in California) become involved with the Farm Workers. We had kind of woken up one day and said, "Here we are in California. How come we aren't more in tune what's going on with César Chávez and the Farm Worker Movement?" So, we went hunting. We heard they were in Los Angeles doing something, so we went hunting for them. It was quite a hunt. We found them in a church, an A.M.E. [African Methodist Episcopal] church, and they had brought a lot of farmworkers from the valley, from Coachella Valley in, and there was going to be a bill passed to put farmworkers into the N.L.R.B. [National Labor Relations Board], which sounded like a good thing, but in fact it would have taken away the ability to boycott, and the whole grape boycott had been what...

[End of Tape 2, Side 1]

Tape 2, Side 2
2011 August 10

EILERS: So, in 1972 we went looking for the Farm Workers, and so, what they were engaged in was gathering signatures on letters to send to Senator Dole to say, “Please don’t put farmworkers under the N.L.R.B.” So, that was a long day of gathering signatures and rewriting letters and going to meetings and et cetera.

CM: So, does this group – when you say “We went looking for the Farm Workers,” was it you and a few other nuns?

EILERS: Nuns, correct, right.

CM: Were you kind of a renegade group in your order?

EILERS: I don’t think of us as renegade. We definitely were a group who wanted to do this justice work. That’s interesting, though. I didn’t feel renegade. I suppose because I was validated as part being on the Provincial team, Catherine Morris taught in the high school, Catherine Bax and Alice, they were younger than us (Catherine Morris and [me]) and had entered in the Western Province, whatnot. Anyway, so we went – we had done this day and then really caught the spirit of the whole Farm Workers and what we could do. And so then (and I don’t know the whole sequence of it), I would get a call from Fred Ross¹⁴, who was the man who worked for Saul Alinsky¹⁵ and he had done a lot of organizing in the LA area, and he was the one who identified César Chávez and talked him into becoming a leader. And that’s a wonderful story. But at any rate Fred Ross used to call me up and say, “Okay, Farm Workers would really, they’re in this desperate situation, can you

¹⁴ Fred Ross (1910 – 1992) was an American community organizer. He founded the Community Service Organization (CSO) in 1948, which organized Mexican Americans in California.

¹⁵ Saul David Alinsky (1909 –1972) was an American community activist and political theorist.

get some nuns to do X, Y or Z?" So, we would do these volunteer variety of different volunteer sorts of things. [Phone rings] Sorry, we don't need that!

CM: So, you went out at Fred Ross's request?

EILERS: Yeah, right. And then eventually his son, Fred Ross Jr., and another guy that worked with him, Bob Purcell, who's actually from Longview, would – sort of became organizers of our nuns, and they would come over and meet with us and discuss different varieties, different things they wanted us to do. And so, in that way, got very much involved with the variety. So, the first was in 1970 or so, so 1973 was the year when the whole Teamsters were raiding the farm worker contracts, and farmworkers in Fresno went out on strike, and they were all arrested.

And so there was a Catholic conference going on in San Francisco at that time, and Catherine Morris, who was a Holy Child sister and one of those that we had done all the Farm Worker things with, was part of this conference, and Jack Morris,¹⁶ who is a Jesuit who is now at the Provincial House here in Portland, and he's the one who started the Jesuit Volunteers Corps here in the Western Province. Anyway, Jack Morris and Catherine Morris (not related) eventually talked people into going and joining these farmworkers out on the picket lines, and so they were all arrested. It was just an incredible number. I think there were 3,000 people arrested at one time.

There were hundreds of priests and nuns that were also arrested, and everybody thought like when you get arrested for civil disobedience you go in and then, you know, you're let out later that day. Well, it was two weeks later before they actually released people in Fresno.

Now, because of this conference, I was back in Pasadena taking care of some of the older nuns. My friends, Catherine Bax and Bernice, went – had gone up and gotten

¹⁶ John James "Jack" Morris, S.J. (1927 –2012) was an American Jesuit priest who founded the Jesuit Volunteer Corps in 1956.

arrested, and then when other people came home and I was free to go, I went up with a group from the *Catholic Worker*¹⁷ in Los Angeles, and we went out to the picket lines 7:00 in the morning; the bus came with “Oh, here we go,” and the bus turned around and didn’t arrest us ‘cause the jail was full. [Laughs] They already had people in all these places and “Now, what are we going to do, we have to stand out on this hot picket line all day?” And so, I ended up getting the job – there were a variety of things we had –.

Oh, the Farm Workers whenever they did something they always did it wholeheartedly, so not only were people in jail but they were fasting. So, we carried out the hunger fast outside, we had a sign on front of the capitol steps, and then part of my job would be to go in and make sure we kept up the spirits of people so that people weren’t feeling like they had obligation they needed to leave ‘cause we didn’t want to leave the Farm Workers without support. However, my gift of tears when I would arrive and tell my friends in jail (they love to remind me) [Laughs] that I would come, and *they* had to be ready to buoy *me* up because I surely was there, couldn’t keep the tears back!

And Dorothy Day was there, Dorothy Day was in jail at that time also. So, that was 1973. And then they finally were released. It was, like, two weeks later.

CM: Was there a noteworthy outcome of this action?

EILERS: Well, you know, that’s a good question. I think it was established that they had a right to have picketed. (That was part of their free speech and so, I think they won on that (if I remember rightly) eventually. But we went from there and went down to Delano where I think a Juana Lecruz had been killed on one of the picket lines in Delano and so the funeral was going on. So, we ended up going down there and joining that piece before going back to LA.

CM: Shall we stop for today?

¹⁷ The *Catholic Worker* is a newspaper published seven times a year by the flagship Catholic Worker community in New York City. It was founded by Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin.

EILERS: Yeah.

[Tape stops]

CM: We were just discussing the culture of the convent, when you were saying you didn't feel – It was a place where you could discuss Vatican II and there were some exciting changes going on in a way to be a novitiate in those years, was just perfect for a new person to be in the convent at the time that Vatican II was being discussed.

EILERS: For me, I wouldn't trade it for anything because I feel it formed me, my whole sense of social justice was formed at that time and in that experience and in those readings and that was so, so valuable.

CM: Yeah. The taking of your final vows...

EILERS: Right, which would have been 1967. I had been living in Portland in 1967, and that's the year my grandfather died.

CM: Oh, yes, we haven't gotten to that yet.

EILERS: There's probably a lot more.

CM: [Inaudible] I thought that was a little bit earlier, but we can save that..

EILERS: I mean, I've jumped around that whole space by getting into the Farm Workers, which was probably more after 1967 than before, but...

CM: That's fine. Okay, done for today.

[End of Tape 2, Side 2]

Tape 3, Side 1
2011 August 17

CM: So, Jean Eilers continuing, and it's August 17th, and we're at Jean's home in Northeast Portland. So, let's just catch up on a couple of details from last time before we start getting into a little bit more review. Just so we get on tape, your first and last name of your maternal grandmother.

EILERS: My maternal grandmother was Frances Keller, and she was called "Fannie."

CM: Keller, K-e-l-l-e-r?

EILERS: Yes. When we were little, we called her "Goggy," and we called my grandfather "Bop." Now, where and how that happened, who knows?

CM: So, your mother's first name.

EILERS: Was Agnes, she was Agnes Theresa Deery.

CM: And you have a Great-aunt Agnes also.

EILERS: I did, right, so probably she was named after my grandmother's sister.

CM: Name of paternal grandfather. I didn't have that on the list, but I just thought of it.

EILERS: Yeah. I believe he was Eilers...

CM: Do you know his first name?

EILERS: I do, but it's escaping me. [It was Fred Eilers] You know, we have the whole family history.

CM: That's okay.

EILERS: It'll be in that, okay.

CM: And the spelling of Shonti, Dr. Bill Shonti?

EILERS: Yes, it's Sharkey. William P. Sharkey.

CM: I was curious to know, when you moved to Aunt Mary's in Raleigh Hills, did you take the bus all the way to Holy Child?

EILERS: My uncle would drive me to the top, or up on to, up over the hill, and then I would meet – often I met Molly Murphy of the Peter Murphy family (lumber company family) and I would ride to school with Molly. She was a year older than I was, and otherwise I think my uncle ('cause there were times probably when she either wasn't going or there was something else going on) – I think he took me downtown, and I took a bus from downtown. And then coming home though, I rode the bus all the way out to Raleigh Hills.

CM: Quite a trip! [Laughs] The blue buses? Is that what they were? Were those the Tualatin Valley buses?

EILERS: Oh, that's interesting. I have no idea. I sort of have the sense that I got downtown and then I had to transfer, and maybe it was not part of what now is TriMet. But when we lived up on Cornell, it was definitely the – you know, it obviously was in Portland. It was the city buses, and it was the Kings Heights bus. They were these little buses because, you know, up those hills and whatnot.

CM: You may have said last time, about what year did you move to Raleigh Hills?

EILERS: Well, my mother died in 1955, so it would have been that year.

CM: Okay.

EILERS: There was one question on here, oh, then I should — you know, my cousin Billy was adopted by his mother and father. Does it make any difference? No. Unfortunately, there was a time when my aunt chose to make it a difference. Which was really sad.

CM: Oh, do you want to...

EILERS: Well, you know, later on, when my grandfather died and so the transfer of the property from my grandfather to my aunt and uncle. So, Billy, Judy and I were sent these papers to relinquish our interest in [it] and being in the convent, I didn't have an interest. Judy should have, and Billy didn't want to give it up and raised questions, and then the argument against it was that he had been adopted so he didn't. In the end he got a settlement, so I think he prevailed in ways, but it was just such a sad, sad statement in my mind. Billy was our cousin. He was Frances and Bill's son as much as we were Agnes'. Grandpa was Grandpa to Billy as much as he was Grandpa to my sister and [me].

CM: Which aunt was making it an issue?

EILERS: Mary, my Aunt Mary, whom I lived with. You know, it's a judgment, but I suspect it came more from her husband than herself, but I don't really know that.

CM: You mentioned taking classes at Villanova? Was this for an actual college degree?

EILERS: You know, Carolyn, it's amazing. I have in those boxes all these transcripts. I have lists of everything I ever took, every grade I ever got, on any of these things, so it was – so, in the convent, you know, and I kept being moved around, but I was all in pursuit of someday being able to graduate, and like 10 years after I started I finally graduated from Immaculate Heart College in Los Angeles.

CM: From what college?

EILERS: Immaculate Heart College in Los Angeles.

CM: Did you transfer credits at Villanova, all these miscellaneous things?

EILERS: Yeah, all these credits, all the Villanova, Catholic University, Rosemont College, University of Portland (one year I lived in Portland I took a course at University of Portland).

CM: If you – was that not unusual for nuns because – routinely you'd be assigned to different places, different locations?

EILERS: I think it was pretty normal for lots during that era. After Vatican II the emphasis on education and better preparation and women having good education, I think you begin to see a difference and a greater concentration and choice. When I decided I wanted a second degree, we were certainly encouraged to go for second degrees. So, I was living in Los Angeles at the time and went to Cal State Los Angeles and pursued a master's in history, which is where I wrote that paper.

CM: Oh, the paper – let's say it on tape.

EILERS: The paper is “Civil War Doves,” and it was written in – it was submitted August 24th, 1971, Cal State L.A., Dr. David Lindsey, History 598.

CM: [Laughs] So, that was after you had gotten your degree at Immaculate Heart?

EILERS: Immaculate Heart, Immaculate Heart, very Catholic term.

CM: [Laughs] Did anyone get a degree from Villanova?

EILERS: Probably, if you lived in the Philadelphia area, you more than likely did. Probably Villanova was the place, ‘cause we went (even the year I taught in Philadelphia) on Saturday. We went to Saturday classes that were somehow under the aegis of Villanova. And then summer school we went to Villanova.

CM: All of these assignments all over the place. Did you have any control in where these might be? How were those decisions made?

EILERS: No, we didn’t have any control, and I guess it was part of the blind obedience of the time. We would be – frequently at summer school – I don’t know who made these decisions quite frankly. I don’t know! There must be some given the schools and probably the principals probably had to have some say in who they needed and were looking for, and somebody knew us must have had some say in the placement and the need to move people and what that was all about and whose decision we just merrily went our way. And what would happen in the summer is there would be a day at which at Rosemont College (during the summer we went to summer school at Rosemont and we lived on the campus). Posted on this bulletin board would be the new assignments, and so you had to go to the bulletin board and see whether you were there or not there. And it’s interesting; I don’t remember it being traumatic particularly. It was, you know, obviously, if you were going

someplace different from me, to be going to Washington, D.C., in 1963 turned out to be quite a year to be in Washington, D.C.

And the only memories I had was there was a Holy Child nun named Sister Mary Caritas, who was very brilliant, and she taught at Rosemont College, and she was very excited about our going to Washington, D.C.; we would be there for the Poor People's March and, anyway, she went [to the march] with us. It was impressive. I wish I had been able to spend more time and learn more from her and that she'd been able to be more of an influence even because the Mother Superior at the convent in Washington, D.C. and the principal of the school (I think, I'm pretty sure she was the principal of the school also) didn't have that same kind of interest. She was a good person but did not have that same interest or intellectual sense of what this all meant.

CM: Were all of the school assignments Holy Child entities?

EILERS: Yes.

CM: Oh, okay. So, then you saw your name one day, Pasadena, California on that list?
[Laughs]

EILERS: That's right, Assumption School, Pasadena, California. You know what I don't remember (cause I'm pretty sure it didn't say anything more than that on this list) was when you found out exactly what you were going to be teaching, and I just don't remember how that happened.

CM: The sister who you admired at Rosemont, were there others that influenced you earlier, not influenced you necessarily but nuns that you admired perhaps in your early consideration of whether to join a convent or if you knew any that struck you as "Oh, I would like to be something like that person."

EILERS: You know, all through grade school I had a nun for a teacher every year. I could name all of them today. And some, you know, I have memories, my sixth grade teacher Sister Ruth Ann Mary just because she was such a good teacher. And I feel like there was a certain love of learning. I guess, I don't know how much nuns sort of cultivated people they wanted to come to the convent, but there certainly was an element of that. And I think, you know, I was marked a little bit about somebody they might want to come to the convents. So, it wasn't a foreign thought to me. In high school the mother superior was Mother Rosemary, and she was – I remember her as being rather charismatic and I'm not totally sure why. I think she was one of – what's interesting to me about it is she seemed sort of daring and had ideas and I don't know what else I particularly saw her as a kind of leader. But after the changes she was one of the people who found the changes difficult. So, it was just an interest – I remember of trying to think through, "oh, people who lived under the old system and had a kind of freedom about it to be themselves even under this sort of strict, traditional way actually had a harder time when the rules were changed." And I don't know what that says but it was – I remember thinking "I wonder what this is."

So, there were other nuns that along the way – (oh, I'm not going to remember right now, it's just so hard). [Both laugh] [Inaudible. Things like that?] Mother Eleanor, I think her name was, who when we lived at Mayfield and she taught us a special English course about Southern authors and Flannery O'Connor and – Mother Norbert, I think her name had been. Then, there were others that, around Vatican II, really were very learned and had kind of tabs on what's going on and what's happening. So, there were – and then there were friends, you know, the people that I just really considered good friends, and some of 'em – Melinda Keane was – I think I talked about arriving in Rosemont, and Melinda Keane, she was Mother Saint Jerome at that time but she later – I got to know her well in California. And today still consider her a good friend. She's in Washington, D.C., working with AIDS, [Acquired Immunodeficiency Syndrome] a program that particularly works with people with AIDS.

CM: At the time of the presidential election when J.F.K. was a candidate and running and winning, the first Catholic president of the United States, was that any buzz in the convent?

EILERS: In 1960, I would have still been in the novitiate, so we would not have had news from the world, so to speak, much. And I don't remember anything at that time. And then, of course, I lived in Washington, D.C., when he died, and that we were very present to, and present for the whole – watching certainly the funeral, and aware then more kind of in retrospect the whole meaning of a Catholic president. So, I would say I learned much more historically than I did at the time.

CM: What was the name of that school in Washington, D.C.?

EILERS: Annunciation.

CM: Okay. The names of some of those nuns that you mentioned last time that you worked with at the Farm Workers. Catherine Morris?

EILERS: One is Catherine Morris, who – well, Catherine Morris actually was – when we first getting very interested and involved with the Farm Workers – this is not when we'd gone to work with them actually, but this was prior in all the activities and boycott activities *et cetera*. So, Catherine Morris, who later really joined the Catholic Worker¹⁸ in Los Angeles and married Jeff Dietrich,¹⁹ and they have – to this day they are the Catholic Worker in L.A.

CM: Oh, my. [Laughs] [Sighs]

¹⁸ The Los Angeles Catholic Worker (LACW) is part of the international Catholic Worker movement, which was founded in 1933 by Dorothy Day and Peter Maurin in New York City during the Great Depression.

¹⁹ Jeff Dietrich, an organizer and street advocate, was a founding member of the Los Angeles Catholic Worker, retiring in 2019 after 48 years with the movement.

EILERS: So, that was Catherine Morris. Catherine Bax.

CM: B-a-x?

EILERS: B-a-x, Catherine actually lives down the street, a couple of blocks away. She is eight years younger than I am and actually went to the same grade school, the same high school, but we didn't know each other, right? 'Cause we were eight years apart. So, we didn't meet until she entered the convent, and at that time they had divided the American Province of the Holy Child sisters into three provinces. There was, like, the New York Province, there was a province which was kind of headquarters in Philadelphia or Rosemont, and then the Western Province. And so, when Catherine entered, she entered in California, and I was teaching in California at the time. So, that's Catherine Bax.

And then there was Bernice Snell, who was actually a classmate of mine at Holy Child, and she entered the convent a year before me, and then was assigned out in California, and she's one of the four when we went to actually join up on the Farm Worker ministry, Catherine Bax, Traverne Snell, Patty Zwang. Patty Zwang was on the East Coast and myself. So, the four of us in 1976 during that summer went to actually join the Farm Workers, and we lived in Delano, California.

CM: Catherine Morris, Catherine Bax, Patty Zwang and you.

EILERS: And Bernice Snell. Catherine Morris did not go to the Farm Workers. She had gone to the Catholic Worker.

CM: Okay. When you moved around a lot when you were still in elementary and high school, you must have possibly changed churches that you attended?

EILERS: No, well, let me think. Let's see, what did I do? [Laughs] So, when we went from – so when I moved up to Kings Heights and my cousin Billy's house, I guess we did

probably go to the cathedral. I don't remember much about it; there wasn't much of a connection, 'cause I think if I still went to school at the Madeleine and so my connection was really to the Madeleine, and when my mother died, she actually was buried from the Madeleine even though we lived (theoretically) in the Cathedral Parish. She was, I think, the first funeral in the new church at the Madeleine, which is still there.

[Tape stops]

CM: Huh. Starting the tape again. I'm not sure why it clicked off. Oh, the spelling of Gladys Love Orsy.

EILERS: Ladislav L-a-d-i-s-l-a-s.

CM: And the last name?

EILERS: Orsy is O-r-s-y.

CM: And the name of the book that you're reading (by him)?

EILERS: I think it's called *Receiving the Council*.

CM: I just wanted to be sure I got his name because he was right, had a role later on. I think that's it for these sort of odds and ends. When I asked you earlier (before the tape went on) about the reaction of friends and family to your decision to join the convent...

EILERS: No, I don't remember much. Again, it was so part of the Catholic milieu at that time, and I don't remember any big to-do.

CM: We already have addressed this somewhat, the backdrop in this country of civil rights and the changing roles of women and Vietnam. Did they play a role in discussions in the Order?

EILERS: Definitely, except for having been in D.C. with the whole Poor People's March, and we were aware, but not as aware as I would have liked to have been when I think about the freedom rides and I think of all of that. But farmworkers when we were in the L.A. area, certainly the Farm Worker and that whole movement, obviously we became very engaged in that. But the other thing was the Peace Movement. We definitely were at that time aware and [caught up?]. Daniel Berrigan, certainly for me, was very much of an inspiration and looked to him – and Dorothy Day also – and saw them taking the stands they did *because* they were Catholic. Their Catholicism was the kind that brought them to these actions, and that I found extremely inspirational. And I think you asked me earlier something about the kind of person you wanted to be, so they were the kind of people, if I could be anything like that, that I think was the sort of thoughts that I had. So, a funny thing, when I lived in – actually was teaching in, Anaheim at Connolly High School, I joined the Orange County Peace Action Council. And did you ever hear of a contradiction in terms like that? [Both laugh]

CM: Orange County (for the benefit of future people who may be listening to the tape) has the reputation of being very conservative.

EILERS: It was the John Birch Society²⁰ really. So, it was small needless to say, but I do remember going once to rally in which the vet from *Born on the Fourth of July*, Ron Kovick²¹ I think his name is, spoke. He was a handicapped vet. The movie is very inspirational. But the other – Don Mustell is somebody who was part of the Orange County

²⁰ The John Birch Society is an American right-wing political advocacy group, founded in 1958.

²¹ Ronald Lawrence Kovic (born July 4, 1946) is an American anti-war activist, writer, and United States Marine Corps sergeant who was wounded and paralyzed in the Vietnam War. His 1976 memoir *Born on the Fourth of July* was made into the Academy Award-winning 1989 film directed by Oliver Stone.

Peace Action Council, and one day when I'm at Powell's Bookstore, when the workers at Powell's were trying to organize, it was a rainy day and we had this – (oh, what did we call it?) – a “unity break,” in which all the workers came out at the same time and were standing on the porch and it was raining all around), and then one of the workers says, “You know, my husband knows you.” Her husband was Don Mustell.

So, occasionally I run into him at something around Portland since then.

CM: And that occurred about – when was that action? Was that 10 years ago, was it that long ago, that Powells was being organized?

EILERS: At least, my guess. I was working for 503 (S.E.I.U. 503), and I stopped working for them in 1994, so, more than 10 years, the first time when they started to organize. They didn't actually organize that time. It was later that they had a successful drive with the Longshore union, they're now in.

CM: What was this time? Were they trying to organize with 503?

EILERS: Right, right. That's really jumping ahead but...

CM: That's okay, let's do it.

EILERS: One of the people who was very active in that committee's name is Debra Beers, and Deborah is an artist. And, as many people, I think, that worked at Powell's they had other worlds but they needed a job. And for my 70th birthday, she gave – and through my daughter kind of making these connections, she gave me one of her pictures, which is out in the front living room. She did, and she did very interesting work at that time. And she did a lot of homeless and youth that were sort of disenfranchised youth, and so the picture I have is of a homeless man standing outside the Union Gospel Mission.

CM: I saw that the last time I was here. Yes. Let's be sure we get her name right. Debra...

EILERS: Beers, B-e-e-r-s.

CM: Okay. Well, that's about most of the catchup items that I have. Was there anything else from last time that you wanted to go over again or clarify?

EILERS: I do want to be sure to mention – you know, we talked a lot about my grandfather before. This is from – the date on this old newspaper is *Oregon Labor Press*, and it was Friday, November 6, 1953, and there's a picture in here (we used to do it this way) and it's my grandfather's meat market back, and it's a picture from 1909 when he got into the meat business and he operated the market at Southwest 13th or 15th, and Jefferson.

CM: That's different from 18th and Burnside.

EILERS: That's right, and actually he – in this story – he, yes, he had his market at 19th and Burnside, so he had that by 1953, but this picture's from 1909.

CM: So, they just dug it up from somewhere.

EILERS: Well, you know the funny thing about this picture. One day – and I have a copy of this and it happens to hang in our bathroom upstairs – and one day Michela and I were at City Liquidators because, as Michela, if she were to tell my story about penny-pinching and looking for bargains...

[End of Tape 3, Side 1]

Tape 3, Side 2
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CM: Okay, so you're at City Liquidators one day...

EILERS: And so, she looks up and she says, "Mom! That picture's there.

So I went to ask the guy, how much the picture was, and he wanted \$200 for it. And being the penny-pincher that I was, \$200 seemed a lot of money! [Laughs] And it was my grandfather's meat market, so why wouldn't he give it to me? Apparently, these pictures (and there were some other, similar style pictures. I don't remember what they were of; they were of other businesses or other work, but they were pictures that were in some Portland restaurant. And probably closed, and the pictures ended up in City Liquidators. Who knows where it is today?

CM: Have you been back to City Liquidators?

EILERS: To check it out.

CM: To see if it's still there? Maybe the price has come down? [Both laugh] The caption, for the record: "Back in 1909, when Ed Deery got into the meat business, he operated this market at Southwest Jefferson and 13th in Portland. That's Ed with the handlebar moustache, in the right foreground, and behind him stands Dan Smith. Ed now operates the market at 19th and Burnside. Ed ran a Right Proud Market back in 1909 when the customers walked on sawdust an inch thick on the floor. Hey, Old Timers, doesn't this picture bring back the memories?"

Now why do you think the *Labor Press* printed this?

EILERS: On this date. Yeah. Good question. Other than in 1953, I would guess that the Meat Cutters Union (was their own union), now they later merged with the United Food and Commercial Workers Union and I don't know if it was some tribute to them or...

CM: Did your grandfather employ people?

EILERS: You know, I don't know the answer to that. [It would] be a great thing to find out. He never had a lot of employees. Of course, he employed my father at one point and then his last person that he employed was named Dan Dody. [Laughs] We remember him.

CM: There is an accompanying article here, "Packing House Patter," that has something in it – the butcher working in Local 656 – so it's a related trade.

EILERS: Right.

CM: Terrific! Wonderful photograph.

EILERS: Right, right.

CM: The *Labor Press* sure looks different!

EILERS: Right. And this makes it – see, Friday, November 6; was it a daily?

CM: Ah!

EILERS: Anyway, I don't know the answer to that. "What's your workman roundup, once a month for the members of the" – yeah, interesting. The other stuff about my grandfather, there's just lots of stuff with the Ancient Order of Hibernia (and I have all of these things): here's the Old Hibernian Hall, and this is because (really) they reinitiated the Hibernian Society.

CM: How recently was that?

EILERS: It probably says on the front.

CM: Oh, 1997. That's quite a building!

EILERS: It's now a ballroom. It's a great building. So, that was my grandfather. So I think those were the...

CM: What's the certified copy of something here?

EILERS: This is my birth certificate. And what's interesting here, now; it looks to be like Jean Anne was written in later, which would fit, because as the story goes, my name was...

CM: So, is it possible that you truly did not have a given name until you were in first grade?

EILERS: No! [CM laughs] I would've had a name by the time I was baptized. And that (I can find my baptismal certificate somewhere in that [pile]. I think it was, like, December but I'm not positive. Oh, and then there was – this was a letter eaten by the bugs, that we found last summer when we were in Ireland and we visited my grandfather's house. And this is a letter my grandfather wrote to his niece Sarah. She had kept the letter; it was written June 23rd, which was his birthday. And as he said, "Thanks for the card. It arrived Saturday. Monday is my birthday. Always glad to hear from you. The grandchildren and great, too, are all well. It goes on about my grandmother – what was the reason I – oh, this was it! "Mary and Ed sold their home and moved in with us until they find another one. Our granddaughter, Jean, who lived with them also moved in with us. She graduated from high school this month; she's going to college in the fall. She wants to be a teacher." I guess that was the piece that was interesting to me. Because I think I'd forgotten (probably) that

I wanted to be a teacher. The other thing – did we talk about my grandfather took the pledge in Ireland, this on June, 1899...

CM: Pledge to what?

EILERS: To abstain from all liquor.

CM: I don't think we did!

EILERS: I mean, it's just another part of the lore of my grandfather! And this is in Rosstown, so it's back in his home place since 1892. I think we'd figured out all his ages. I have it written somewhere. Oh, here it is! Okay, so he was born – June 11, no. Family tree. Edward Deery. He was born June 23, 1873. And he emigrated to the U.S. in 1892. And then he died March 26, 1967.

CM: The date of *this* is June, 1892.

EILERS: Oh, so the year he emigrated to the United States – so this was before he left.

CM: Yeah. And this appears to be a faith-based pledge to abstain.

EILERS: And it must have been somewhat common 'cause it's a form, obviously, that they had and people filled out. So, that fills in a little more about Grandpa.

CM: Yes! And we looked at that picture last time.

EILERS: Right.

CM: So, any of those that you either want to copy, or give to [Inaudible]...

EILERS: You know, I will, Carolyn. Put these in this box and then at the end (or at some point) just sort out what is...

CM: That's good. So as you think of things and you come to them, just put them there. Good idea. Anything else from last time that you felt like you needed to go back to?

EILERS: No, I think that – I think we covered it.

CM: Well, proceeding on, I was wondering if there was anything you wanted to say about the Farm Workers? You stayed there for five years.

EILERS: Right. What a rich time! What an incredibly rich experience of those five years. As I stated earlier, there were four of us that went to work for the Farm Workers, and it was the summer of 1976, and Catherine Bax finished her nursing school, and (I think) joined after she finished nursing school. We ended up being in Delano, and being assigned to work in Delano. Catherine obviously, being a nurse, worked in the clinic. Delano was 40 acres, which was César's kind of headquarters, and they had a clinic there and they had field offices, and I worked in the field office and was assigned as a paralegal to work with the lawyers.

The Agricultural Labor Relations Act had just passed which – prior, I had fought to get it passed, it had actually been in a visit to Jerry Brown (*first* time he was governor) to urge him to pass the Agricultural Labor Relations Act. And the thing about this that's significant (people don't realize, perhaps) that when the National Labor Relations Act was passed, farmworkers were excluded, as were domestic workers. And some of it was racism, some of it was classicism (I think). I think I told the story at some point – the story I tell in the documentation project with LeRoy Chapfield and the Farm Workers, how we collected signatures to say "Please don't put farmworkers on the N.L.R.B. [National Labor

Relations Bill] (which sounds like a contradiction but because the N.L.R.B. had been so restricted by Taft-Hartley, that you couldn't have boycotts, the only thing that allowed farmworkers to really organize (and get the grape industry organized). However, with the opposition from the growers continuing, then there was seen a need to have some law, some regulation, so that farmworkers could form unions and have it recognized and have a process.

After the Agricultural Labor Relations Act was passed (it's a California law), shortly after that we went to work for the Farm Workers, so as a paralegal, I was engaged around all the hearings that would happen, either because of unfair labor practices or questions around elections. There'd been something unfair. So that's what I did; I worked in the field office. And Bernice and Patty, who weren't nurses but they chose to work in the clinic, also.

Shortly after we went to work for the Farm Workers, [the U.F.W.] became engaged in a ballot measure, Measure 14, which was – we had done, and this is before I'd joined – Ballot Measure 14 was to make a strong law and get it passed that would restrain the growers from all the ways which they beat up on the farmworkers in their process. And the growers defeated – well! So, we got enough signatures, we did all kinds of things.

There are some great stories here, too. One being, one day – a lot of the volunteers for Farm Workers – and there were lots of college students and whatnot who volunteered and worked for Farm Workers for five dollars a day and room and board – and so part of the campaign, then, was to get signatures to get an initiative passed in California. And to get those signatures, they went to shopping malls, a whole variety of places. And one of the places we went was an indoor mall. It was testing the whole issue of whether you could collect signatures inside the mall, or was it going to be this private property sort of stuff? And so, we're in this mall, and they've asked priests and nuns to come and help with this job. And our job would often be (because they didn't think we were that good at collecting signatures as the organizers were) [Laughs] so our job would often be the symbolic one, going in to see what they were going to do if we were trying to do soliciting signatures inside the mall.

So, this one day (and I don't remember – somewhere around the [evening time] area, I don't remember exactly where it was) we were inside the mall, collecting signatures and along comes the owner of the mall with security guards. And so, we keep on doing our – until they come, and then they stop us. Well, the owner-person was really the son of the owner, and he was a kid I'd taught in seventh grade! So there was no way he could arrest this former nun-teacher, right? [Both laugh]

CM: Do you remember his name?

EILERS: I think it's Mark, but...

CM: Seventh grade in one of the schools [Inaudible].

EILERS: Must have taught him in Annunciation. Anyway, it was a very funny moment.

CM: So no way he could...

EILERS: So we sort of ended amicably that day. That was one memory from that. So anyway, they got enough signatures and it was on the ballot. So, we started in the summer, working for the Farm Workers; we were in Delano but then to try and get Proposition 14 passed (it's one thing to get the initiative on the ballot and the second thing is to get it passed) all of us were rounded up to work on this. And I, working in the field office, came in early and worked in the campaign offices, and part of my assignment was setting up events and meetings for César. And some of those would be with movie stars, and some of it would be with a whole variety of various different things, and then getting the logistics 'cause César traveled with some body guards and dogs; his dogs that he loved. [Laughs] Huelga and Boycott. That was my job on this campaign. And then later, Bernice and Patty and Catherine came in to work on the campaign. I lived in one of our convents and went to them – down to the headquarters and worked with.

CM: When you say you were assigned to these various things, is that by the Farm Workers, or it...

EILERS: Yes.

CM: Did the Order essentially say to you, “You’re free to go work with the Farm Workers”?

EILERS: They did!

CM: “Wherever or however they tell you what to do.”

EILERS: They were totally supportive, right! Which was really nice. We chose to work through the National Farm Worker Ministry. Chris Hartmeyer was the director for that, and he had brought the National Farm Worker ministry to be totally supportive of César Chávez and the campaign. You know, these church groups often want to be a bit aloof, I think, and to really be engaged, and to really be there, and be the most useful. So we kind of went that route, but it was ultimately the same thing, room and board and \$5 a week, but our money came through the National Farm Worker ministry somehow. Yes, I must say the convent was great, and totally supportive. And it also, for me, for us really, a total kind of security. We had the best of both worlds. You know, we had an Order, if we had some terrible health condition or something, that would have been there to support us, as well as having this opportunity to be with the Farm Workers. So it was really great! That was the beginning. And actually, after that experience of working on the campaign, Bernice and Patty decided this wasn’t the life for them. And so they left working for the Farm Workers and went back East (both of them) and then went off in different directions. But Catherine continued working in the clinic and I was working in the field office, and we didn’t need as

big a place to live, so we moved to a smaller apartment. That was a great experience, actually, in many ways.

CM: In Delano?

EILERS: In Delano, right. When we first all arrived in Delano, we actually lived in (one or two rooms? I can't remember) of Agbayani Village.²² Agbayani Village was a retirement village that had been built on 40 acres for the Filipino workers, because Filipino farmworkers had been recruited over. [They] were single; they weren't able to bring their wives, and so in retirement, they really had next to nothing. So this whole village was built for them. [Laughs] And they always served Filipino food, and we had a little bit of a hard time eating fish with their eyes still in 'em! So, we lost some weight during that time (that we probably could well afford).

CM: So then you moved into a smaller place.

EILERS: And then we moved into an apartment. And Catherine and I, when there were just the two of us, moved into a smaller apartment. And then Catherine actually ended up leaving after a year, and I then had other volunteers for the Farm Worker to share this apartment with. Ken and Debby. Debby Miller and Ken (I can't remember at the moment).

CM: Were they students?

EILERS: They had actually worked on the boycott (I almost want say in Toronto, but I'm not sure that's right; it might have been New York, somewhere in New York, or Connecticut, somewhere in New England). And then had come to work – so I was in Delano. It was an incredible time. You know, Delores Huerta²³ worked there. Very funny

²² Agbayani Village was listed as a national landmark in 2008, as part of the Forty Acres facility.

²³ Dolores Clara Fernández Huerta (born in 1930) is an American labor leader and civil rights activist who, with César Chávez, co-founded the National Farmworkers Association.

story with Delores for my first assignment is I'm going to take notes in negotiations for Delores for (I forget the name of the company) and it meant I had to go from Delano to La Paz, which was in the Tehachapi Mountains, just east of Bakersfield.

First of all, you had to go through the gatehouse; they didn't know who I was; they had to check with Delores, but they couldn't find Delores. And then they find Delores and I finally get in and then Delores has all these books because she thinks she negotiated something. And she can't find the papers on it, so my job's to try to find these papers. And then we're to go – she has to be in Fresno, because she's giving a talk in Fresno at the college (Fresno State, I think, something like that). But first she's got to find babysitters for her kids! And so somehow that gets worked out. And we get in the car and Delores is driving, and we get to Delano and we're out of gas. So, we go to a gas station and the gas station person knows Delores; she doesn't have any money and so he gives her the gas, and we continue on our way to Fresno. And we get to Fresno and we missed the time she was supposed to give the talk. So, quite frankly at that point – then she was going to need to get on a plane to go somewhere else, and I could hardly wait to get her on the plane!
[Both Laugh]

I mean, she was great, but she was also – I mean, she was amazing at what she did, but when you think of this sort of world, of how she sort of kept all these pieces together – so then I came back to Delano.

CM: The place where you were supposed to take notes while she was in negotiations, this was in the owner's – someplace on the farmer's place?

EILERS: Well, it seems to me we would often meet in a library or in different places for negotiations.

CM: When there was a gatehouse, it sounded like it was some kind of estate, or mansion or something.

EILERS: Oh, the gatehouse was at Tehachapi, the headquarters for the Farm Workers. La Paz. And that was the headquarters; and there was just – with reason, ‘cause there’d been lots and lots of threats on César’s life.

CM: Did Delores feel threatened?

EILERS: I’m sure she had been, but I never saw her act like it. She was pretty amazing.

CM: Are we approaching the time when you’re leaving the Farm Workers?

EILERS: [Not yet]. There was a lot of Farm Worker time. Five years, Carolyn.

CM: Yes, so keep going!

EILERS: So, there is that whole year in Delano. It was pretty amazing, the number of people. I worked with Glenn Rothner,²⁴ who was one of the lawyers assigned to Delano. So as a paralegal, sort of assisted him in a variety of different things and saw the whole – The lawyers were located in Salinas and worked under Jerry Cohen²⁵ (who was brilliant!). And there again, there were a whole set of volunteer lawyers who – It was a tumultuous year. Prop 14 was lost, and soundly defeated (as I remember).

CM: That was the election of 1976?

EILERS: Right. That would have been in 1976. And I think César was particularly devastated by it. And it was hard to accept that defeat and go on. So it was a hard time, and there were many – oh, a variety of – the law has just come in, dealing with elections and the A.L.R.A. [Agricultural Labor Relations Act] and all of that. There was a desire to

²⁴ Glenn Rothner worked as staff counsel to the United Farm Workers of America, A.F.L.-C.I.O., from 1975 to 1978.

²⁵ Jerry Cohen was the U.F.W.’s first legal counsel, working with the organization for over a decade.

stabilize; we'd gotten a raise from \$5 to \$10 a week and room and board. Then, there was a movement by the lawyers (you know, as your life got on and if you were going to put more time into this, and make this a permanent sort of thing, you couldn't continue – or at least some felt they couldn't do this work for room and board and \$10 a week. So there was a movement in the lawyers first, to have some salary (and again, it wasn't outrageous by any matter or means, or what any lawyer could earn). So that created some rumblings and divisions and questions and ways to think. So that was starting then, and then there were also sometimes people (and this is all written in some of the recent books about the troubles that started to begin there)...

CM: With the Farm Workers...

EILERS: With the Farm Workers, right. It was still obviously, with the workers and the farm – I remember the committees, and some of the workers and personalities – remember the woman on the – one of the great committees; her husband worked for the rose company, Mount Arbor Roses. But, Jose would walk his wife, [Esperanza]. He would walk her to the meeting 'cause she was president of the committee for her Farm Worker group. And he'd sit out in the front room and she would be in her meeting, and when the meeting was over he'd walk her home! So that whole spirit of people, and learning their lives and getting to know them was really a great experience.

CM: This must have been an interesting time for the women in the whole farmworker community.

EILERS: Right. One of the people in Delano was Eliseo Medina,²⁶ whose history one can read in the history books, and is now on the international executive board for S.E.I.U.

²⁶ Eliseo Vasquez Medina (born in 1946) is a Mexican-American labor union activist and leader, and advocate for immigration reform in the United States.

Eliseo was a farmworker when he was like – I think he didn't go to high school. Very smart and very bright. And he went out as a young teenager to Chicago to organize a boycott. This is in 1964, 1965, somewhere around then. And did it! [Inaudible] [Laughs] Right! Exactly! And so he is on the executive board for the Farm Workers. And his mother lived in Delano and never missed a Farm Worker meeting at Forty Acres.²⁷ She was great. But there were lots of personalities like that.

CM: What was the family...

[End of Tape 3, Side 2]

²⁷ In 1966, "The Forty Acres," a parcel of land in Delano, California, became the headquarters for the United Farm Workers of America.

Tape 4, Side 1
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EILERS: And the workers went out on strike. They were in negotiations, and – I can't remember his name now, but he was a tractor driver, and his pledge was, "If they got their contract settled, he would make a pilgrimage to Our Lady of Guadalupe," which he did, they settled it and he [went].

CM: Oh. [Inaudible].

EILERS: It was interesting. Delano, funny little city, right. There was the Catholic church for the growers, and the Catholic church for the farmworkers. Guadalupe and I think the other one was St. Mary's. But you can imagine, the little city.

CM: Yeah. Were the farmworkers at that time mostly Latinos?

EILERS: And Filipino, there were a lot of Filipinos. There were also Arabs, there were a lot of Arab workers who came to the clinic. I remember them especially coming to the clinic for some reason. So, it definitely was a mix of races.

CM: Were the meetings held in both English and Spanish? Or maybe just Spanish, or...?

EILERS: I don't know, I don't remember, that's a good question I'm sure.

CM: Well, *you* understood the meetings, so.

EILERS: Right. And my Spanish, I was learning Spanish, so, at least English and Spanish and I don't know. You know, I do remember the Arab workers, so there must have been some way that they were communicated with also. And I remember at some point having an organizer, an Arab organizer, who worked with us.

CM: Were there any ethnic divisions in – that had to be addressed organizationally? Would the Arabs agree with the majority of Latinos?

EILERS: Right. I don't recall a lot. I know there had been – Phillip Veracruz, he was on the executive board and certainly brought the Filipino perspective. There were some challenges, this whole crazy time when César was supporting Marcos in the Philippines, and Phillip was like, "What is this?" kind of thing. Actually, I remember Monsignor Higgins coming out to Delano and challenging César's support of Marcos even though he was totally supportive of the organizing of farmworkers. Monsignor George Higgins, quite a figure, labor figure, in the Catholic Church nationally. So, Delano was – there was also a school for farm worker kids started in Delano, the Huelga²⁸ School, and Shelley started it. We all drove Valiants, Plymouth Valiants or Dodge Darts, I think, were the same make, you know. Just two different names, and then the mechanics had to learn [only] one car.

So, I was in Delano for – Catherine left after a year, and I stayed on, as I said, and then I was in Delano – and I don't remember exactly but at some point Eliseo, who was the field office director in Coachella, said that "Jean, you should be an organizer, none of this paralegal stuff, you ought to be an organizer out there." So I accepted that invitation and went to Coachella and worked in the field office there as an organizer. And that – Eliseo left not too long after that, and then Ruth Shy was the field office director. Ruth Shy had been a sister of Loretto, [but] was not a nun [then], I don't know when she left or if she even knew what the difference was [Laughs]. But anyway, Ruth's a great person. I'm still in contact with Ruth.

CM: What's her last name?

EILERS: Shy, S-h-y.

²⁸ Huelga is Spanish for to strike.

EILERS: So, then, Coachella, my memories in Coachella, you know, I was learning the whole citrus industry and the dates (again, a very interesting time) I probably learned more Spanish in Coachella finally. And then, at some point I know Ruth went off to a meeting in the park and came back and said, “Well, Jean, you are going to be the director of the field office in San Ysidro.”

And I said, “Oh, you know, I’m not really interested in being a field office director.”

And she said, “This isn’t a question!” [Laughs] “This is an assignment.”

“Oh, I see.”

CM: From who?

EILERS: Well, César and the board and whoever. It was kind of like the convent. They made decisions and you went! [Laughs] So, I went off to San Ysidro, and was there for a while, which was interesting experience. Again, being right on the border with Tijuana, and, tomatoes and again there are personalities that stick out in my mind and memory of Farm Workers there.

CM: So, as director did you direct other organizers?

EILERS: I think there was one other organizer, Javier, who lived in, actually, in Mexico, came across the border every day. I think for the most part that was true.

CM: When you were an organizer just before that, was that your first taste of organizing?

EILERS: Yes, right! Right in Coachella. Eliseo had a great method. Every morning we would have a morning meeting and debrief the day before, and it’s really where you learned and were challenged and were kind of sent out on what to do and how to do and how it went. And Ruth was a superb organizer and she was a great support. And we had a lot of organizers and there was a clinic in Coachella also, right next door. So, we had a

great community of people there, people both who worked in the clinic as well as worked in the field office.

CM: So, when you organized, did you go out and talk to workers in the field and say what?

EILERS: Well, in Coachella it seems to me more what I was doing was working with workers who had already chosen the union and were either negotiating their first contract or were setting up their own ranch committees in order to have their shop stewards and maintain their contract and keep it in force, so. I would go out to the fields and talk to workers and find out what grievances [they had] and try to work with workers to figure out who should be the leaders and when new workers came, make sure they understood being members of the union and what that was.

CM: Was there ever an issue at this time about immigration status?

EILERS: You know, it's interesting. I'm sure there was. There was a hiring hall with the Farm Workers, so when people came to be sent out to a farm, you came to the field office, and there was a hiring hall and somebody was there, and a worker goes up and they show their papers or certainly something, and then – or there's Social Security or something – and then they'd be sent out to the field. We had many workers whose name – you know, one I think of, Simon Cruz, and then later he was Eulalio "Sump'un-Else", and this was a paper issue. A citizenship issue. So, that's all I remember about it.

CM: There were no deportations?

EILERS: I don't remember that happening. You know, the border patrol, I don't remember encountering that.

CM: San Ysidro, right on the border.

EILERS: Right, I don't remember particularly there, I don't remember it in Coachella either. It could have, but quite frankly, it was somewhat overwhelming to do my own piece of the job. [Laughs] And, then, at some point (I don't know what years these are, I was probably a year in Coachella and maybe that long in San Ysidro, I'm not sure) then, the boycott was renewed, and a lot of people were being sent out to cities around the country again to renew the – and I don't know if this was the grape boycott or the lettuce boycott, might have been the lettuce boycott.²⁹

CM: Still technically an illegal action? The boycott?

EILERS: No, must have been okay under the A.L.R.A. And we went – they needed somebody to take over the whole union direction for the field offices as well as for the arbitration. So, Ruth Shy was going to take directing all the field offices, and so I went to do the arbitration. So, we moved to the headquarters. And the process for doing arbitrations was – a complaint would not get settled, [and a grievance was filed] – a grievance wouldn't get settled at a particular ranch, and so then it would proceed up the steps and the last step being arbitration. And because of the expense involved and also because you didn't want to set bad precedents, cases were carefully looked at for their merit, before you took them to arbitration. So, my job was to go through that, kind of study all these arbitration books, see what had gone on before and whatnot, and then meet with César to discuss whether this should be taken or not taken. So, that was interesting period of time.

CM: Any examples of things of a frequent type of grievance or something?

²⁹ Addition from Eilers: "I believe the farmers needed the workers and wouldn't report the citizenship issue."

EILERS: Oh boy, I should remember things. Of course, when people got fired, that was always a big issue. And, boy I don't remember. I should remember, but...

CM: Did they get fired for being active in the union?

EILERS: That was probably what we claimed and what we saw and then would have to prove how that and why that had happened and why it was up there. And it did happen, certainly. Growers did not embrace having unions. So, there was that time, anyway.

CM: So, you met with César to discuss these things.

EILERS: Right! Oh, I know what I was going to say. He was – I remember one time in particular when César talked about the people that he met. He was constantly gleaning education from people that he would meet and learn more and understand more. So, he would (quote) “I had this meeting with so-and-so and this is how they see this” and that was part of my impression with César. You know, living in La Paz was interesting, the headquarters. Then, Ruth left the Farm Workers. And, again, this was a time when there was starting to be – there was a group of Farm Worker leaders in the lettuce industry, 'cause the lettuce industry had been through a lot, and the development of – oh, and they had gotten contracts where they actually paid a worker to be the union rep, and he worked full time making sure the contract was enforced and on the [payroll?], paid by the grower.

CM: Paid by the grower.

EILERS: Paid by the grower, it was in their contracts. And so, they developed great leadership skills. It was really wonderful to see. But then, also with that came they expected more say in the running of the union and they'd be wanting to be on the board of directors and so they put up the next convention, Farm Worker convention; they put up a slate of people they wanted to run for office.

CM: They.

EILERS: They being these leaders, [farmworkers], particularly out of the lettuce. And eventually they didn't succeed. So, anyway, there were these different tensions around. That happens with all organizations. And I think what we looked at was – César always wanted it to be a movement, and it was hard. As it developed it needed to be a union, it needed to be...

CM: Okay. Keep going.

EILERS: So, at any rate, Ruth left at some point, and I stayed on a while longer, but kind of with all of the things going on, you know, I really looked to Ruth for leadership and companionship in some ways. So, I finally moved from La Paz to live in one of our convents in Pasadena, still worked for the Farm Workers for a little while, and then in June pretty much decided to leave the Farm Workers. Oh, and that would have been 1981. So, that's pretty much; I mean there're a million other stories, right? And the people that I met and got to know, you know, through all of this.

I think I mentioned Ed (that's not the name), Fred Ross, Fred Ross Sr. back at that whole getting involved. Well, his son, Fred Ross Jr. – very involved with the Farm Workers all of the time and to still get to know him and to have worked with him with S.E.I.U. for a while was really very nice to have those kinds of connections. With people from the Farm Workers and...

CM: So, then when one stops working for the Farm Workers after so long and so dedicated, do you just...

EILERS: What do you do? [Laughs]

CM: Or how do you make that understood with...

EILERS: I actually found the letter, a copy of the letter, that I wrote to César saying “This is to let you know I’m movin’ out.”

CM: Did he respond?

EILERS: I doubt it. I don’t remember exactly how – Frank [Cortez Ortiz?] was kind of the manager that I was working under, and I think, you know, much more I just dealt with finishing up business through him.

CM: So, you’re back in Pasadena?

EILERS: That’s right, but what do you do? There was a funny period of working for temp agencies (temporary agencies) and getting assigned these jobs. Oh, ‘cause I also left the convent at the same time more or less. That, of course, is a whole nother story, but [it all means?] what do you do? So, I worked for temporary agencies, and what do you in California? You end up working for Disneyland. [Laughs] Or different companies. Disney had an engineering company called, I think, WED³⁰, which was Walter Elias Disney, but so, I would go –like clerical types of jobs and whatnot, and did that for a while.

But the other thing, then, I was looking for a union job. And I mentioned Glenn Rothner was a lawyer there that I had worked with a lot. Well, Glen had left the union and ended up – I think he was working for A.F.S.C.M.E., or maybe he was working for a law firm that did legal work with the different unions. So, he suggested that I apply to work with A.F.S.C.M.E. (American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees) in Los Angeles. There was a statewide California group, and eventually that’s what I did. And they were in the process of organizing workers in the University of California system. So, that’s

³⁰ Walt Disney Imagineering was formed by Walt Disney in 1952 as WED Enterprises (WED: Walter Elias Disney) to develop plans for a theme park and to manage Disney’s personal assets.

how I worked on that campaign in – so starting really pretty much in 1981 put me up to 1983.

CM: Maybe we could back up a little bit, and leaving the convent, that decision.

EILERS: That decision.

[End of Tape 4, Side 1]

Tape 4, Side 2
2011 August 17

CM: Okay, leaving the convent.

EILERS: So, I had to – I think a lot is having had the five years with the Farm Workers and living outside the convent, although I always had incredible support and sense of an appreciation for the fact that it had given, really provided an opportunity for me. I also (and this is hindsight) had come to realize that when I looked at my history, with my father dying when I was 10, my mother died when I was 14, I – a lot of entering the convent had to do with a lot of security issues, and that eventually, as I look back over all this, and it's not that these things are clear when you're making these kind of choices.

I think that I was seeking to put family together in some ways, and so, to leave the convent, to marry and have Michela, when I look back on that I think was a completion of something I had missed in terms of family. So, in terms of particular decisions on why to leave, I do remember a day, I'd been in Salinas, and I was driving back to La Paz, and I'm sobbing, and "Why am I crying?" I'm crying a lot over having lost my father and remembering that whole who he was and just missing my father and knowing that somehow that needed to be repaired or put together, some closure, I guess, maybe is the word. Part of, you know, my father died because he drowned in the Deschutes River. Did we cover that?

CM: You didn't say that, no!

EILERS: When I was 10, he had gone on a fishing trip. We have a picture of him, he caught a fish that day out there. And then his friends that he was with (and one was his boss Harry England and his wife) and they were going to walk around the river to the other side and my father was going to take this boat [a yellow raft] across, and he – when they got to the other side they found the boat empty. And it was 10 days they dragged the river, and all kinds, and it was 10 days later that an Indian fishing at Celilo Falls found the body.

So, he'd been in the water for a week, and he died on September 11th, 1951, 50 years before September 11th, 2011 or...

CM: 2001.

EILERS: 2001, thank you. The thing – so, there was never closure 'cause we never saw his body because he'd been in the water for a week and whatnot. So, I think (and as a little kid I used to dream that he would walk out of the woods one day). [Laughs] And, so, I think for a long – and there was this other Catholic thing about – there were certainly people worse off than I was that – so I couldn't feel sorry for myself. You know, there were starving babies in China, all of those Catholic things that you didn't allow yourself to feel sorry for yourself, I think. So there was a need to (even a long time after, sort of appeared the need to) resolve that. And I actually did see somebody who helped me think that through and came to the conclusion of, "You know, my father loved me, and that's the memory that I need to keep from that time and that year" and, who knows, yes, I would have loved as an adult to have been able to share other stories and know other things, but nonetheless that I know was true and can keep that memory and can live with that memory.

So, and also this whole change in the religious life. So many people were leaving. If you were look at it statistically there were a lot. And so, many of my friends had left. Every one of those people that I joined the Farm Workers with had left the convent. And many, many others. You know, Catherine Morris and many others. So, I was kind of an anomaly in some ways. But it was important for me to, because sort of making a vow that this is what you're going to do, and it was meaningful to me. There wasn't – I didn't have any anger or regrets about it, but it wasn't something I could lightly just say, "Nyah," you know, I've lived outside the convent and changed, so it wasn't that.

Bob had come back. I knew Bob, we met in high school (Bob being my future husband). [Phone rings]

CM: If you need to go, it's okay.

EILERS: No, I don't need to answer that. I could just turn it off. We had met in high school, which is sort of a funny story. In high school I went to Spokane – he was from Spokane. So, I had gone to leadership – I think it was a journalist conference in Spokane for high school leaders, and I was the editor, I think, of the yearbook. And went to this conference, and at the conference we met these boys from Gonzaga High School, not Bob but some other boys.

CM: There's a Gonzaga High School?

EILERS: Yes, as well as the college, yes. And the conference was at the college, but there were, you know, all these Catholic high school kids that come to this. So, then we went – so I came back to Portland, and one of these boys that we had met moved to Portland (his family moved to Portland) and we got to know him 'cause he was part of the crowd. And one day Bob and another boy that I had met at the same thing were coming to Portland. They were actually on their way to visit the seminary, and there was some priest was bringing them down to visit the seminary, which is in Sheridan.

And they stopped and stayed with their friend Art [Verharen, and Art lined up – he had a girlfriend at Holy Child and he lined up two others of us from Holy Child to go with these boys. So, that's how I met Bob! And then later we met at some other leadership conference in Seattle University. And then we both (lo and behold!) go to Seattle University, and we dated a little bit, not much, and by the time I had decided to enter the convent we really weren't in any kind of relationship and so he doesn't even remember if I ever even told him I was going to the convent.

So, some years later anyway because he was a priest and I was a nun and he got in contact and he came to Holy Child one time when I was there. And then Vatican II and many changes and we found more in common and visited and (lo and behold) began to care about each other, and – but, for both of us it was, we didn't want to leave to marry each other. We wanted to make sure that we dealt with why we were leaving and that that

was a finished sort of decision. So, it took a long time. [Laughs] And *well* it took a long time, in many ways, I think, because it gave me the – I would, you know, that whole period that I worked with the Farm Workers? And he went through lots of different things as a Jesuit and different things that he did. So he was important, but I also came to think, whether he's there or not there I think I want to marry; there was attraction to wanting to have a family to – so. As I find these letters, I read and see, tell the story. So, I left, and I tried, I really – I went around, I remember going and visiting the convents in California so that people knew it wasn't a rejection of religious life and it wasn't a rejection of them and it wasn't a statement about – that I didn't think they were important and doing good things and the right thing, but I felt that this was a decision I needed to make. So, that June of 1981 were both transitions from the convent and from religious life.

CM: Is it a formalized process?

EILERS: Oh, yeah! Wait 'til you see the papers, in Latin no less!

CM: Oh, my. [Both laugh] Did Bob come and see you in this Farm Worker setting ever?

EILERS: Well, way back in 1973, that was the year that everybody went to jail, he actually came after he'd been in a – been giving a retreat someplace and came, 'cause there were many Jesuits. And Jesuits he knew who actually were in jail. He did come then. Oh, one other time he came when we were in Delano. He and – he'd been with a friend and they traveled through and they traveled through Delano, and then one other time – oh, one time we went to visit – several of us went to San Francisco to see a priest, Father [Frank] Hodek, who was kind of a leader in various things and we had known him from other experiences. And I stayed with a high school friend of mine, Molly Stone who lived in San Rafael (I think). And Bob was studying at that time at Berkeley in the Graduate Theological Union, and so we saw each other there. And then one time before he went – he was on his way to Alabama, and we were living in Pasadena (Catherine Morris,

Catherine Bax, Alice Callahan and Helen O'Neil). We were all living in kind of this experimental apartment as opposed to the convent to try to live a more simple life.

CM: Your idea? The four or five of you?

EILERS: Right, right. And the Order had approved of it, and, right. There are funny stories from that. Catherine Morris basically left and married Jeff Dietrich. Alice Callahan is a unique story unto herself. She's now an Episcopal priest. She runs – in Los Angeles she runs a center for (really) many of the workers who work in the sewing industry in Los Angeles, and she has a school for their kids that she started. But Alice is a unique – Alice Callahan, unique person. So, Bob. He was in and out...

CM: He was on his way to Alabama when you were...

EILERS: Yes, it was when we were living in this house in [Inaudible], and so he spent some time in Alabama and, oh, and then he had other assignments in different places and whatnot. Eventually, he had decided – he really wanted to think about leaving, and he actually didn't communicate during this whole process where he was trying to go through this, and I didn't know where he was. He'd come down to Santa Barbara, and I was actually working in Oxnard, which is close to Santa Barbara, probably with the Farm Workers and traveling between Pasadena and Oxnard. So we became more in contact and whatnot. I left in 1981, we married in 1982 and Michela was born in 1983.

CM: Bing, bing, bing. [Laughs]

EILERS: I know, right! But needed to be, we were getting old!

CM: That's right. You had Michela at age...

EILERS: Forty-two.

CM: My goodness.

EILERS: Right, right. She's 28 now, and we are 71 or about to be 71.

CM: I'm remembering that you – your grandfather died in 1967 or so, and you happened to be on assignment in Portland.

EILERS: In Portland, correct.

CM: Is there anything about that that you wanted to talk about, about your grandfather dying, was he perhaps the last of your family?

EILERS: Well, my aunt was still alive. But, right, it was good to be there. You know, he definitely failed, and it was really nice to be able to be there and just feel at least you had that closure with my grandfather.

CM: Were you assigned to Portland because of that, or was it just a coincidence?

EILERS: Who knows?

CM: That's true. No coincidences, right? [Laughs]

EILERS: No questions asked! The year in Portland was an interesting year. Again, it was great to be here because my grandfather and my sister was here in Portland and got to have some contact with her and her two kids. And then the other person, Carol Curtis (Mother Mary Juliana), she went on her – the Order decided to do mission work in Chile, and Carol Curtis, (Mother Mary Juliana), who was teaching first grade at St. Rose, she was

one of the first to be assigned to go. Anyway, it was really great to spend that time with her and (sort of) her getting ready and going to do that and so, that was part of my memories for that year in Portland.

CM: Well, this feels like a real beginning of a new chapter coming up, married life and so forth. But your work with A.F.S.C.M.E., that was before that, right?

EILERS: No, it's after I left, after I left the Farm Workers, after I left the convent, then I began work with A.F.S.C.M.E..

CM: A.F.S.C.M.E., but married yet?

EILERS: Not 'til 1982. I was working for A.F.S.C.M.E. at the time I got married.

CM: Okay. Maybe that would be a good place to pick up next time.

EILERS: Okay.

CM: Is that all right?

EILERS: Sounds good.

CM: Okay.

EILERS: All right.

[End of Tape 4, Side 2]

Tape 5, Side 1
2011 October 19

CM: This is the oral history of Jean Eilers. It's Wednesday, October 19th, and today we're meeting in Carolyn's home (Carolyn Matthews, the interviewer) in Northeast Portland.

Shall we just proceed with Farm Workers? This question I was kind of curious about. I've heard you say in earlier sessions perhaps that you made a shift at some point in your life in the convent from charity to justice, and I've been assuming that perhaps part of that shift was a result of your having worked with the Farm Workers. And then, what is known later on was what happened in the Farm Workers: a lot of internal strife, a lot of difficulties. I wonder what, if any, influence that had in shaping your ideas of justice, if there is anything about that you'd like to say.

EILERS: I think certainly, the biggest thing that me conscious of the shift from charity to justice, I think, is the whole engagement in the discussions that came out of Vatican II. And so, then, when we had the opportunity to go and do other work, I had looked at different things but then ultimately the whole experience in California and whatnot really led me to believe that I so much wanted to work with the farmworkers. And yes, I do think that there was an element of "You know, I'm going to go save the farmworkers," and it didn't take long to work in the Farm Worker Movement to recognize that farmworkers were quite capable of saving themselves, and that our role was much more one of helping to make that a level playing field so that they could realize their dignity and their voice and their rights. So, it was a growing experience and an experience that you have to attribute a lot to César, to take on that leadership role that he had in forming the union and the stance he took and the role he took. The attraction of many, many people coming to work with César and some of the "best and the brightest," I guess, (as we called them) was constantly just such a wonderful experience to be exposed to and work with people like this.

I mean, Eliseo Medina was a great inspiration and it was great to – actually in Delano, his mother lived in Delano, and his mother never missed a union meeting, so Friday

night she was always present at the meetings. But then, knowing that Eliseo, who I'm not totally sure he ever even finished high school even, just went on and was just so capable and competent in so many ways and went out on the boycott to Chicago, and, you know, he was still a teenager, I think. And led the boycott in Chicago, then developed into the leader he was, and it was – see, Eliseo was the director; he was kind of the director of organizers, I guess, when I came to work with the [farm workers]. And I was in the legal department working as a paralegal when I first went, and it was Eliseo who was said “Jean-o, being an organizer is much better than being a paralegal. [Laughs] Being an organizer is what you need to be, we need organizers.” And organizers are, if they're the right kind of organizers, is an element of justice, not charity. It's where you're challenging people to recognize within themselves what they have to be leaders. So that is a lot of learning, and learning from all the people that I was around.

CM: So then, later on, when there were such difficulties within the Farm Workers, a lot's been written about that; we don't need to go over it, but did that begin to challenge your ideas of the goals of the Farm Workers and modify your idea of what justice was or at least the justice that was in the Farm Workers. Was that troubling at all?

EILERS: No, there were many hard things about that. I think it's one of those, you know, how do people grapple? And different personalities, I think, grapple differently, with our ideal organizations that are human and therefore flawed. And so, it's always troubling, and certainly in the process I saw people really hurt because they were misjudged, (or judged as oh, anything from Communist to who-knows-what kind of things), and then be eliminated from the Farm Workers. And those things always felt very unfair, and you were always weighing that standing up for one individual versus the whole movement and the good that's being done by organizing farmworkers. And then understanding how much power you had yourself to make change. And then weighing “so do I stay or do I go?” And you saw people go, especially in those years along the line, and so a lot – I had seen a lot of people leave by the time I left, which was in 1981, June, I think it was 1981. I had seen a

lot of people leave, people that I really admired and so it raised questions. It didn't raise, it didn't – farmworkers having a union was the right answer, but I certainly was there during that whole period when the Teamsters were making sweetheart agreements with the farmers and the growers, and so it's not like I thought just unions in and of themselves are good or are always going to choose the right thing. And again, I would say that the experience I was having with workers, with farmworkers, was the union's good for them on this level where they have a voice and where they can stand up.

And then there was the time when César went to the Philippines and was honoring Marcos, [Laughs] and that – Monsignor Higgins³¹ came out to Delano, and I don't remember what his real purpose was, but there was this big meeting, and for us to see Monsignor Higgins, and he called César on the carpet about supporting Marcos. So, you know, it wasn't that these things didn't get raised at all. And then, right after I left, there was the workers in the lettuce industry particularly, which had been well organized, and they had had contracts in which the growers would pay the wages of a worker to be the union rep, to be working out any issues with the growers and the unions.

CM: Sort of like a steward?

EILERS: Yeah, like a steward, but they were actually paid, it was negotiated in their contract that a person would be there, which makes sense when you think about it. If it's going to work smooth it's going to be worth it to the grower to pay someone who's taking that on rather than having to spend a lot of money and time in other kinds of arbitrations or grievances or whatnot. Anyway, it developed great leaders. And, then the great leaders might want to have a voice [Laughs]. And so, then, there ended up a lot of controversy before the next convention on election for the board of directors for the Farm Workers. And César had to the people he was comfortable with.

And here's Jean Eilers' theory, which has no, you know, I've never – I can't say I haven't had conversations, but I had no way to evaluate the truth of this or not. But Ballot

³¹ George Gilmary Higgins (1916 – 2002) was an American labor activist known as the "labor priest."

Measure 14 was a ballot measure that when the Agriculture Labor Relations Act had been passed and then it wasn't funded and so in order – and this was again the growers' power and whatnot to fight back against the ability of farmworkers to organize – what we did was collect signatures and got a ballot measure and got it on the ballot. And that had the success of getting the board refunded. And it was a very strong – I don't remember what the wording was in particular, but it was strong language and it was clearly what the growers didn't want, that kind of thing.

CM: And it passed?

EILERS: It didn't pass; it went down in flames because the growers spent beaucoup bucks in fighting it and whatnot. And it was a huge disappointment to César, just a huge disappointment. Having sort of made that decision that we're going to go for it. 'Cause he could have dropped it after getting the funding – was another—and then, spend your time really organizing workers and all that energy that had to go into the ballot measure. But it always felt as though that defeat made César more paranoid or more possessive and more controlling and fearful of other powers-that-be. And (I must have heard this talked about with others) the thought that maybe it was time for the Farm Workers to be more of a union than a movement. But we still – the staff were living on – we were up to \$10 a week in room and board from \$5, but nonetheless, if people were going to stay in this for the long haul, that was a hard thing to ask for people. They were willing to commit themselves to that kind of lifestyle for a period, but for the long haul and the desire to actually see the Farm Workers grow into a regular union and define itself and et cetera. So, the lawyers actually were the first to sort of push for that, and César just would not agree to that at all.

CM: What is meant by “a movement versus the union?”

EILERS: I think in my mind a union is an institution. You know, institutions have all the problems that institutions have because of the rigidity, I think, that happens over time and

so they sometimes lose the spirit and the energy and the idealism that a movement has. That's what I see is the difference.

CM: Is that how César saw it?

EILERS: I don't know. I don't know 'cause this wasn't he telling me he wanted a movement instead of an institution. [Laughs] This is sort of my reflection on – and wishing – He used to talk about a poor people's union, and you wonder if – how do you get leaders who burn with so much idealism and the tenacity and the practicality and all the things that César had to do all the things that made the Farm Workers' Movement successful, to let go and know when something's at its point where it should be let go, and then take on something else! I mean, that would be my ideal way it should have gone. [Both laugh]

CM: As you approached the time of leaving the Farm Workers yourself, was there a particular precipitating event or anything that just seemed like it was the last straw, or was this slowly coming?

EILERS: Yeah, I think it was more slowly coming. I saw a lot of people leave. Ruth Shy, who was a volunteer, but had worked with the Farm Workers much longer than I was and very gifted and talented. And we actually – when I went to Coachella, which was when I went from a paralegal to being an organizer, Eliseo was there in charge of the Coachella office, and then shortly after that, Eliseo went, I think, back to Delano in another position. Then he eventually left the Farm Workers. And Ruth Shy was the field office director in Coachella, and then she and I both ended up going to La Paz, Keene, California, which was the headquarters for the Farm Workers, when they sent another group out on the boycott. And she was in charge of the whole field operation, and I was in charge of the arbitration department at that point. So, Ruth chose to leave at (oh, somewhere along in this line), and that was certainly a change for me.

I didn't leave right then, but I shortly after that moved from living in La Paz to living in one of our convents in Pasadena and still traveling. Sometimes I had to go to La Paz or go to Oxnard or who knows where. But it wasn't long after that. And then, it was also – the same time was going on, the – people were leaving the convent. My friends in particular, more and more were leaving the convent, so that question was raised in my mind: "Do I want to leave the convent or do I not?" And so, working out that issue, working it out, leaving the Farm Workers and finding myself one day driving from Salinas to Bakersfield sobbing because my father had died and I hadn't dealt with that, somehow! All of those sorts of things, I guess, it's funny when you look back at these things how we mature or how we deal with just the variety of different things that then move us to a new stage in life.

CM: I'll tell you that in reviewing our last tape or two and recalling, realizing that in a very short time you left not only the Farm Workers but the convent, had no family to speak of, and were working at a temporary agency in Southern California, which meant working for Disneyland, honestly I was near tears in thinking how sort of marooned you must have felt at that time! [Both Laugh] But maybe that wasn't so, maybe you didn't feel that way.

EILERS: It's funny, Carolyn. I often say about my life that "Boy, I just feel like I've won the lottery; all these things that have happened, and people will remind me like that. "But what about –," and sometimes we're fortunate enough to be built in a kind of resiliency that is just a gift of who we are and happen to have, which I think is part of it. And the other piece, though, when I – it's true I left that time, but I had *very* good friends who had left who were still very close friends. So, it wasn't like when I left *that* community, there was still another community that I was very much a part of, so.

CM: And your relationship was developing with Bob?

EILERS: Right, right, right, so there was lots going on, right!

CM: Well, before we totally leave the Farm Workers there was just this one little detail I was curious about. You lived in some kind of intentional simple living group with some other nuns during the time of the Farm Workers.

EILERS: It was before the Farm Workers, actually. Right before I went to work for the Farm Workers.

CM: What made you do that?

EILERS: Well, I think, again, it was this whole Vatican II and starting the discussions. It's a very good question, I wish I could remember – Several of us who lived together, Alice, Catherine Bax and myself were recently together and reminiscing a bit about living together in this community that, I think, some of it is that you and some of it is “we are going to go be better than everybody else in living this out.” And, in fact, we weren't a whole lot better than anybody else [Laughs]. We were just in stitches over the sort of arguments that we had, how we couldn't get along, things that came up. Anyway, it was very fun to laugh about it.

CM: You ate beans and rice and slept on the floor or what?

EILERS: Not exactly. We thought we were being just much simpler than the sort...

CM: The convent allowed you to do it.

EILERS: They did! I must say, the support from the convent was great. Support for working with the Farm Workers was very good. And I think I shared this last time that when I decided to leave that the General of the Order actually wrote a letter and (a loving letter) challenging me about leaving, which (looking back at that), I really value because it says a

whole lot more about how they valued *me* than it does for the people who said, “Oh, fine, goodbye.” And it is, I think what you want, really. You know, it’s not saying – it’s not a put-down that you would have these thoughts, but it’s the kind of challenge to say, “Be clear about your reasons.” Anyway, just looking back at that I really value that piece.

CM: Well, working for temporary agencies then, this new phase in life.

EILERS: Well, right. It obviously was just very temporary, and it was, again, good for me to go from the convent where really you had no – we took a vow of poverty but we had no worries about money. [Laughs] So, what we knew about poverty and what people who live in poverty know about poverty are two totally different concepts, I would say. So, what was good, was it’s not like you make a lot of money doing temp assignments nor do you have healthcare nor do you have those sorts of things, and then you have bills you didn’t count on when you made your budget, like the car broke down and needed to go to the shop. So, it was good, kind of reality check on what life is like.

CM: So, you were looking for a job that had a union presence, right?

EILERS: Right, so then, if I was to stop to think about what do I know how to do and what do I *want* to do, it was certainly in the world. And, again, talk about being able to be a part of the community, I had a community of people who had worked for the Farm Workers, and now many of them had left the Farm Workers and were working with unions in the area. So, that was how I ended up actually applying for a job with A.F.S.C.M.E. and going for an interview, with Glenn Rothner, who was a lawyer with the Farm Workers.

CM: Rothner?

EILERS: Rothner.

CM: My notes are a little bit confusing. Is District 65 the same as A.F.S.C.M.E.?

EILERS: No, District – so, I went and worked with A.F.S.C.M.E. for – they were working on organizing the University of California employees, and pretty much the whole gamut – not the professors, I would say, but pretty much ‘cause where there were hospitals, they were organizing some of the hospital staff, whether it was clerical or technical or...

CM: Big deal!

EILERS: Yeah, it was a very big deal. The whole university system in California. I don't know how many people there are but it was – was a big deal. And some of this is, you know, the change when the rights for public employees to unionize, I don't know when the California law was, but I suspect it hadn't been all that far in the distant past, and so this was relative to that. And so I lived in the – I ended up working with – being hired on the – as a “project organizer,” I think we were called, for this campaign. And it meant being U.C. Irvine and especially at the hospital (there's a hospital in Irvine, I guess). It's connected with U.C. Irvine, I don't remember exactly; I remember going there many times, but–. And then the other was at U.C.L.A. because there were many there. And I think occasionally we went out to Riverside. So that was an interesting experience. I assumed – ‘cause after all, I only worked for room and board and \$10 a week, I really didn't know anything about union organizing, and these organizers that I now was going to work with who got real money and could rattle all these terms, N.L.R.B. and things like that that I had not become familiarized with yet, were awesome. And then I found out we knew a lot more from our experience in organizing with the Farm Workers.

CM: The nitty-gritty of actually talking to people?

EILERS: Exactly, and being systematic and about the kind of hard work that it took, and willing to do it and whatnot was invaluable, and you could learn those acronyms.

CM: So, this effort was successful?

EILERS: It was. We – so, I leave in 1981 in June, and I probably was hired, like, September or October (somewhere in that time I suspect, if I remember rightly). And so that would have been 1981, and the election ends up being in 1983. In the meantime I get married, Michela was born March of 1983, and so I take some time off and then went back for, I think, the last couple weeks before the election, which might have been in May.

CM: You were married in California?

EILERS: Actually, we were married in Washington but we were living in California.

CM: And Michela was born in California?

EILERS: Yes, I know we regret. She should be an Oregonian, but there you go, she was born in Pasadena, California. So, that was my experience with A.F.S.C.M.E. was really working on that campaign, being part of it. And it was a great experience, too. And it's so funny. Arlene Holt³² was the assistant director in the Los Angeles office, and she now has a position with the national A.F.L.-C.I.O. So, it's funny to hear these names and see where people go, and people – and Vern Watkins was – has been working with the – like an assistant to Bill Lucy,³³ who is one of the – he's, like, the secretary-treasurer of the national A.F.S.C.M.E.

So, those were the people I worked with in Los Angeles, and again, sort of brought you into another perspective of unions. And unions as institutions; it's like the Farm Workers I said probably needed to become more institutionalized, and yet when, like A.F.S.C.M.E. – which is the union, remember, that Martin Luther King was in Memphis with

³² Arlene Holt Baker (born 1951) is an American trade union activist and labor leader.

³³ William Lucy (born 1933) is an American trade union leader.

the sanitation workers, and he was killed. So it was growth in the knowledge of good national union. But all the quirks and things you didn't think were good, and annoying and whatnot.

CM: So you were laid off after the election was successful. Because an organizer wasn't needed anymore?

EILERS: Right. I was a project manager. Right. And that was probably a good thing, 'cause Michela was just a baby. [Laughs] So, sort-of was a happy time to be laid off, at least a little while. And then (I don't remember these things; I probably have some records somewhere I could really [Inaudible]. Seems to me I went back to work for A.F.S.C.M.E. for a little bit and then was laid off again.

[End of Tape 5, Side 1]

Tape 5, Side 2
2011 October 19

EILERS: [Then I went to work for a union called District 65], which was affiliated with the United Auto Workers.

CM: And what did they do, or what did you do with them?

EILERS: They represented, like the members of California Rural Legal Assistance,³⁴ they represented several legal – like legal aid, the Los Angeles Legal Aid, Remember the group in Oxnard, [Oxnard] Legal Aid, I think it was called.

CM: As an organizer? Were you an organizer?

EILERS: Yes, right, and union representative. Mary Ann [Massenberg] was the person who had been the representative for a long time, and so I was helping her out, actually. Mary Ann – this is interesting, at that very time was in communication with the Multnomah County Legal Aid here, and they organized at that time.

CM: So, that was a connection that was useful for the future for you?

EILERS: Well, only in, you know, sort of funny ways, like Cliff Jones. I don't know if you know Chris Jones. He works with T.A.C., which is – it now has a new name actually.

CM: In Portland?

EILERS: In Portland. He does – they do a lot of very helpful training with nonprofits and they're very good. He, in particular, is excellent, and we often have him at S.E.I.U. Local

³⁴ California Rural Legal Assistance, founded in 1966 is a nonprofit legal service program created to help California's low-income individuals and communities.

49 for trainings that are useful. Well, he was a lawyer at that very time organizing with District 65. [Laughs] So, that's—you know, it's those sort of connections that you have in life that...

CM: So, who were – C.R.L.A. [California Rural Legal Assistance], you were organizing with then, Legal Aid, California.

EILERS: Right.

CM: Anybody else?

EILERS: There was – I'm trying to think who they were. There was another county – Orange County? That doesn't sound right. Orange County? There was another Legal Aid and I can't remember the name of it at the moment.

CM: Successful drive?

EILERS: Well, these – yes, and these were – in some cases it was coming to getting their first contract. Well, the L.A. Legal Aid. They had been organized some time, so it was mostly ongoing negotiations or grievances or issues. And then – the funny part about it – of all those people they represented, and then they represented these button makers, a company of buttons – and the Lerner's warehouse. Remember Lerner's?

CM: I sure do! My favorite store when I was nine years old. [Both laugh]

EILERS: Their warehouse workers we represented. So, I did that, I think, for only nine months, and then we moved to Portland. But Mary Ann was a very talented, very, very talented organizer and very smart in negotiations and smart in just working with people, and so it was a great treat to work with Mary Ann.

CM: So, just moving to Portland you and Bob just wanted to move back home.

EILERS: Yes, that was pretty much it, right, exactly. And Bob had finished. He went to Cal State Dominguez Hills and got a marriage, family and child therapist degree, and really wanted to be up in this area.

CM: So, while you were at District 65 that's what he was doing?

EILERS: Going to school, right. And then he – and then he came up to look for jobs and ended up getting a job in Vancouver with the Catholic Services, “Catholic Community Services,” I think it's called. That's how we got back to Portland. And then – so I was in Portland and I'm looking for – sort of enjoying being on unemployment. Michela is two, and the – one of Bob's nephews who's looking for a job sees an ad for “S.E.I.U. 503 needs an organizer” and sends it to me, thinking it must be right up my alley! [Laughs] So, I can remember – you know, “Oh yeah, for unemployment reasons you need to make these applications and be job searching,” so I sent in my application and got called for an interview. I thought, “Hey! I should look up where this union is. I don't have any idea who they are!” They were O.P.E.U. at that point, and that was the title they went by; I didn't know if they were affiliated with the A.F.L.-C.I.O. or who they were or whatnot; I'm sort of walking into the building trying to pick up clues – this interview. Anyway, so I ended up getting the...

CM: Where was the building?

EILERS: In Salem. And Alice Dale was the executive director. So, then I was hired. There's a funny story about that. On my list of references I had Marshall Ganz, who had worked with the Farm Workers, was very instrumental and a lot – but he's one of the people who had left the Farm Workers. He now works at Harvard in the School of Government,

does a lot of trainings, and he's the one who trained a lot of Obama's election people on being community organizers as opposed to just being political advocates.

So, anyway, Marshall Ganz was on my list of people to – for references, and so Alice calls Marshall, and Marshall doesn't return the call for a while. And so, I'm hired, and when Marshall does call back, he says, "So do you know about her background?" So, Alice is thinking, "Oh, my God, what have I done?" [Laughs] And Marshall says, "Well, she was a nun!" [Both laugh]

CM: Alice herself must have been early in her career at that point.

EILERS: She was. She had been a lawyer with O.P.E.U. at some point, and then left and probably worked with a law firm, but then came back when they were choosing the new executive director, and so she was very new as executive director and just ready to make change. So, it was a great time to be with O.P.E.U., and Alice – and it was that whole time in the labor movement when you – a lot of unions were realizing they needed to change from the service model to an organizing model, and the difference being that in a service model it's the union rep comes out and handles your grievance and you call him up and they come and take care of the problems, and the organizing model is "No! You're the ones with the power and training people to stand up for themselves and to recognize how to take care of problems in the workplace." And so, Alice was very much a part of changing the culture in O.P.E.U. from that servicing model to an organizing model. And also, wanting to organize new workers as well.

CM: So, O.P.E.U. really grew, probably.

EILERS: Yes, and they have continued to, certainly. I couldn't tell you the numbers, but they're huge, you know, compared to what they are now they were much smaller.

For example, we went out on strike in – I went to work for them in 1987 probably. And I'm not sure which year it was, 1986 or 1987, and the state workers went out on strike in 1987 and did this rolling strike. That meant a day at the Bureau of Labor, and then a day Portland State, and then a day at, you know, a variety of different places, and because people – where you couldn't get workers to go out and they couldn't afford to go out for two weeks, and this was a way that you *could* get people to be willing to honor that. And then they also had a flying squadron, a group of workers who committed to be out for the whole time on strike, and then they would go to whichever site it was.

CM: How long did that last? That sounds like a big deal.

EILERS: Yes, it was a big deal, but I would say that it didn't last more than two weeks, and it was probably less than that, possibly less than that.

CM: And the results?

EILERS: Right, it was a good contract, whatever the main contract issue was resolved. But the biggest thing was it really, really empowered the membership to have a sense that it's *their* union, to have a sense they *can* stand up from things they believe in.

CM: Was shifting the model from service to organizing, was that difficult for the workers to make that transition?

EILERS: I think so, Carolyn. The people that it was most difficult for were people who had been officers in the union and so were more knowledgeable and had more stance maybe in – and, again, it's not totally *their* fault because the union cultivated this as much as anything. But when they were officers they sort of expected – you know, they had their role as important, but they called on the union to go do this, this and this to take care of the workers kind of thing. Whereas, new workers were excited about the new model, and

so it's like any kinds of change, you have those for whom there's something they like about the old. Trying to get them to change into the new; it's not easy.

CM: Has that model pretty much stuck with 503? The organizing model?

EILERS: Yes, yes, yes. You'll see, for example (and I don't know if you were even aware of this with, like, the 49), the staff members who work, with Kaiser, are called "organizers," they're called "internal organizers." And "external organizers" are working with people who are not members yet but organizing new workers. And intentionally because – and it's really fun to see – 49's a great place. Here I go skipping all over the – [Laughs] It has a great spirit of really being an organizing model because it's a small union, but it is incredibly ambitious on the number of things they do and places – and they can only do it by really believing in an organizing model. And so, they make goals about the skills that they're going to develop in the stewards, which will mean that over time a steward handles a grievance all the way up to the third step, so the staff member doesn't – you know they're in communication but they don't have to go and walk each time there's a grievance. This person's more than competent for many reasons. It's such a good model for many reasons because it's much harder for the company to have to listen to one of their employees who's empowered and knows the ins and outs and cares about working for an organization and owns it as much as they do, as it does to have this sort of businessperson come in.

CM: So you – somewhere there was a shift for you from 503 to 49?

EILERS: Oh, right, what's the little roll of stuff that happened? So, I left 503, I decided – (this is funny). I started working for 503 and I was full time, and it wasn't long, and Michela's still little, right? And so it was actually Alice that said to me, "You want to work part time while Michela's little," so I ended up working part time. And ultimately what it became was (this is sort of the question you raised) is working four days a week. I took

Tuesdays off, it seemed sort of weird, but it meant – it was always good. I would always have Tuesdays with Michela, and the work was Mondays, I'd come in, if there were any fires to be put out or things you needed. And there's nobody that couldn't live without me on Tuesday 'cause there I was on Wednesday if something needed to be done or whatnot. You know, not that in union work it's certainly not all 9 to 5 but nonetheless it gave a sort of stability and time to be with Michela. That she remembers. I have all these little books so that when she could finally learn to write in first grade and the old guessing go away when she writes, "Me and my mom." And she would talk about on Tuesdays the things we would do together.

CM: So, what would Michela be doing on the other four days?

EILERS: She went to – she (let's see, I said she was [three?]) – she went to daycare. I remember looking for daycare when I was going to work for 503, for O.P.E.U. , and we went to –we were living in Vancouver, and there were two close-by Foursquare Church daycares. And we went to one, and I went into observe, and you could have one color-crayon at a time. And so when you could ask your green, you got your green and you'd have to turn your green one in to get a yellow! Now, I think this is a little rigid [Laughs] for – so then there was another one that seemed to have a much better spirit about it and openness and whatnot and so Michela was there for a while. And then one day we were driving someplace, and she's in the back seat in her car seat, and she's singing, "I don't march in the calories, I don't march in the calories, I'm in the Lord's army."³⁵ Oh, I think it's time to change daycares! [Laughs]

CM: Oh, so what was that church like?

³⁵ The original words (sung to the tune of "The Old Grey Mare" were: I may never march in the Infantry, Ride in the cavalry, Shoot the artillery... But I'm in the Lord's Army." It was a Salvation Army song.

EILERS: So, anyway, so then we did, which is also another sort of funny story. We also moved from Vancouver to Portland because we just found ourselves really much more in the Portland community. And ended up finding a daycare for Michela that was at the old Holy Child high school building, which was now the – I think it was the Vietnamese Vicariate.

CM: Up here on Sandy.

EILERS: On 54th and Sandy, right. That's where I went to high school. That's where Bob had been novice master because after the school closed, the Jesuits used it as a seminary, for their novices. And then, so it was sort of funny, all three of us had experiences in this same building. So, she was there for a while, and it was fine. We changed – I think it was just because we had neighbors that went to a daycare in Redeemer Lutheran Church on Killingsworth and 20th, I think it is. And so she ended up there, and there's another wonderful story.

One day after having been – I was working for 503 O.P.E.U. then, and it was, well, I don't know if it was the year of the strike, or anyway it was the year the march went on and Michela came to this march and then she went back and so she and another little girl whose father was an organizer with O.P.E.U. – one little boy stood up and said, "You know, milk will make you strong."

And Michela jumped up and said, "No! The union makes you strong!" [Both laugh]

And the kid looked at poor Michela, like, "What planet do you live on?"

And so she had to argue, "Yes, this is true!" having heard many times "Solidarity Forever."

So, that was one thing, and the other one after the march she and Audrey got up and led all the kids in a march in which they said, "Hey, Neil, take a hint, two percent will pay the rent!" And then they went on, "Hey, Neil, take a hint, three percent will pay the rent!" and they did all their numbers. They marched the kids around. (Neil was Neil Goldschmidt; he was the governor.) So, those are child care stories.

CM: Yes, wonderful.

EILERS: Not indoctrinated.

CM: At some point O.P.E.U. became S.E.I.U.. Do you know how that happened?

EILERS: Yes, it was long before I came. They were already S.E.I.U. when I came. They – and I don't really know the story. It has something to do being an association, and the association gaining more power and the national affiliation happens. So that had happened before, but the members, talking about they owned it, and they liked it being called Oregon Public Employees Union. So, it's been a long, long history of holding onto their O.P.E.U., and I would say now, they're much more recognized as S.E.I.U. 503. But that took a long time.

CM: They're even still identified as both on labor radio as being a sponsor. They link the two sets of initials.

EILERS: They finally made their e-mail address S.E.I.U. 503, 'cause you can imagine O.P.E.U. , S.E.I.U.. There's millions of stuff goes on, which is institutional in some ways, and there's stories and all of that stuff and there's culture in all of us, but most of it's power trying to hold against the powers that this country really – it's overwhelming when you think about it. They talk about being legal and whatnot. Well, they certainly don't respect the legal right of workers to organize. It's just such an insidious way the people who hold themselves as these upright, they're the law-making, law-abiding rulers.

CM: When they're breaking it all the time.

EILERS: Exactly, exactly.

CM: So, you're part-time at S.E.I.U. 503 doing what? What are you organizing?

EILERS: Well, I was an internal organizer for most of the – all of that time I guess. And had different assignments at different times. I represented workers at Portland State a lot of the time, out of the state office building in Portland. D.M.V. was interesting. City of Beaverton. Those are the ones that stand out in my memory. There's lots to do in – again, what you're trying to do is form and building the leadership in each of these units to develop their skills and ability to be the union. And at the same time there are goals, union goals, because there's so much in the political world that needs to be an effort to maintain what you can. So, a lot of times those are some of the activities you're trying to engage people in, and keep people going. I worked for them from (what'd I say?) 1986 to 1994.

CM: Quite a while. Eight years.

EILERS: And then I almost decided since Michela was in middle school now I could work full time.

CM: [Laughs] Was she being opportunistic or...

EILERS: I think there were a lot of pressures, quite frankly. Probably every organizer wanted to work part time, and here I got away with it, right? I think there was some of that, and how many people get to say that's what they're going to do for whatever, and Michela would have survived I'm sure. But it gave me – you need change along ways. At least I could find myself starting to get stale and get [Inaudible], so it probably didn't hurt to make some sort of change then. And I ended up working part time for the S.E.I.U. local in Vancouver representing school employees in the Vancouver school district as well as in Longview and up. They represented school bus drivers in Kalama and Woodland and that

area, and school employees in Woodland. So, I did that for about three years, a little more than three years.

And then Alice called and said they – and then John Sweeney³⁶ had been elected to the national A.F.L.-C.I.O. presidency after Lane Kirkland. Huge change at that level. And they were shaking things up in a lot of ways, and were wanting state directors in each state and then we would work in regions, like the Western Region. And so, Alice sort of nominated me for that job. It's a more pompous title than deserved probably, but nonetheless that was it. So I ended up getting that job, and that's when I worked for the A.F.L.-C.I.O. from 1997 to 2005.

CM: Another eight years. She nominated you. Is it elected or appointed?

EILERS: No, it's appointed, but it was the decision makers were the A.F.L.-C.I.O..

CM: So, was this a whole new way of working for you?

EILERS: Oh, yeah. Scared, I – Again, you know, when I think about it, I think I described what it was like going from the Farm Workers to a union that paid wages. I'm thinking, "Oh, how am I going to measure up?" Well, it was the same sort of new world for me because, again, the world of working within a union, especially with the workers, you're just right there, and working for the A.F.L., when it's your own union, there's much more decision making and determination. And when you work for the A.F.L you're really dealing with all these different unions, and the cultures of all these different unions and what. It was like, "What do I know? I'm not sure I know all those acronyms again for all these unions [Laughs]. And the trades. What have I ever done with the trades and to understand that culture, which in Oregon is not different than a lot of places, but I think you would find the I.B.E.W. in Oregon very different than the I.B.E.W. in Seattle, for example. My counterpart

³⁶ John Joseph Sweeney (1934 – 2021) was an American labor leader who served as president of the AFL-CIO from 1995 to 2009.

for the A.F.L.-C.I.O. from Washington, Bob Gorman, came out of I.B.E.W., but again much more progressive, liberal sort of perspective. It was another one of those lyric leaps.

CW: So what did you actually do for eight years as a director?

EILERS: That's a good question!

CW: Did you put out brush fires, and squabbles between unions, or...

EILERS: What *did* I do? I went to a lot of C.L.C. meetings. C.L.C.s are...

CW: Central Labor Council.

EILERS: Thank you!

CW: Just a guess!

EILERS: A good – good job, Carolyn. Very good. And at that time, we must have had nine, ten in Oregon. So going there, and meeting with them and again, our push was to try to get people to be organizing, think about organizing. Think about ways with new workers, and...

CM: This was partly Sweeney's influence.

EILERS: Right. And trying to push that because that's what the Labor Movement needed, was getting more members and getting people to change from the service model to the...

[End of Tape 5, Side 2]

Tape 6, Side 1
2011 October 19

EILERS: Certainly was great acceptance from the S.E.I.U.s and some of the A.F.S.C.M.E.s, and certainly like L.E.R.C., the Labor Education and Research Center, and in different places with the Letter Carriers and the Postal Workers in different places. So, we tried to lend a hand in where they were trying to do new things or make changes or tried different experiments like in Eugene we had a (oh, boy, I'm not going to remember the name of it) we actually had, they formed out of the Labor Council there, a group formed to be getting unions to work together on thinking about organizing and actually doing some cooperative organizing, and putting – we put together some conferences around [chairing these?] and bringing people together. Lane County organizing projects is what it was called, L.C.O.P. And...

CM: Were unions hiring organizers, more organizers during this time? In this push to organize?

EILERS: Some were, I think the laborers were working along those lines. There certainly was some...

CM: Any particular personalities you remember during this time? Interesting alliances? Professional or personal or conflict?

EILERS: Well, right. It was an interesting time. I barely came on and (his name just escapes me as soon as I try to think of it) the head of the Northwest Oregon Labor Council, the one that was really Portland-Clackamas – counties around here, Ron. It will come to be at some point. Anyway, he decided to retire shortly after that, and then Judy O'Conner, who had been the secretary, became the Central Labor Council head. It wasn't totally a comfortable relationship, there; they were more old school and not for this kind of organizing, and found the push for organizing uncomfortable. They found Jobs With

Justice³⁷ uncomfortable. It wasn't different than changing in the convent when you think about it; it was the same kind of old fears and the way we liked the way things we did them.

CM: Jobs With Justice, did it begin around this time?

EILERS: It began around that – it began actually earlier than that. Not a whole lot earlier because it was sort of seen as filling the gap. To be pushing for the organizing, doing direct action, doing much more. That kind of model, where C.L.C.s had gotten a little more staid, and so. If you went to California, for example, the C.L.C.s were very active and very much in the mode of really being leaders in – and so you don't see Jobs With Justice chapters a lot in California.

CM: Huh! Because there isn't the gap for them to fill!

EILERS: Right, right, right. But here it got started and was very good, was seen with suspicion somewhat by labor councils and different unions. But, you know, Margaret [Butler]³⁸ has done a great job of building relationships...

CM: Was she in a [Inaudible].

EILERS: She wasn't [Inaudible]. When it started, it didn't have (trying to think), I almost want to say they didn't have any staff and it was just a volunteer organization, and then they hired staff and Margaret was the first executive director.

CM: She certainly had a presence.

³⁷ Portland Jobs with Justice is a coalition of over 100 labor, faith, community and student organizations and individual activists taking action for workers' rights and economic justice

³⁸ Margaret Butler was Executive Director of Jobs With Justice for 16 years, until 2013.

EILERS: Yes, oh, yes. And it's interesting. Again, you know, there's so many places for that question about an institution versus movement versus – and you would say when Jobs With Justice started it was much more of the movement model (I would say) in that that kind of forming and pushing and doing things that C.L.C.s, the institutional C.L.C.s weren't doing. But how do you sustain them? I think Margaret would say that the ones that have grown and are the strongest – J With J organizations – are the ones where the executive director has been there for a period of time. So, it's that question with institutions, it's true when it gives it stability; it's kind of ability to continue and to do real things and build on past. And when you have a lot of change, while the spirit may be there, it sometimes doesn't carry on and have the kind of strength that it needs to be a force.

CM: While you were in this position at the A.F.L.-C.I.O., did you work with Jobs With Justice at that time yet?

EILERS: We did. There was a bit at the beginning, somewhat of a conflict because – again, with the A.F.L.-C.I.O. is now change! And it was vibrant and alive and what need was there for Jobs With Justice because now we had this wonderful A.F.L.-C.I.O.? So, there was definitely some questions about what's the role of the A.F.L., what's the role of J With J, and then eventually saying, "Why don't we work together?" Makes a lot more sense. But there was some tension I would say at the beginning, and [this tension] was coming from the [local A.F.L.-C.I.O.]. Marilyn Schneiderman was the head of field services (I guess we called it), which was the national director for the field directors. And we had a regional – we were the Western Region, so Mark Spillane was the director for the Western Region, and so he was my boss. And his office was in San Francisco.

CM: So after eight years you stopped working for [the A.F.L.-C.I.O.]?

EILERS: I retired. I had this great retirement party, Carolyn. It was a total surprise, and it was great! But I clearly retired – the A.F.L.-C.I.O. went through – John Sweeney was out

there, and then it felt like he wasn't. He was being pulled back by all these other unions that wanted to stabilize things and then there was a bunch of conflict kind of grew around different things. No longer could we be each state field director; they divided all the staff into three, we were either in the organizing department or the field services, I guess did a lot of education. I'm not sure what else they did, I think, more of that kind of thing and then our politics. And so I chose to be in the organizing part. And so, we really worked as a region, and we worked on the America West [Airlines] working with the Teamsters – was it the Teamsters that organized the America West? (Hmm, int [isn't] that interesting!)

CM: What was America West?

EILERS: America West was the airlines. It's now merged with – (now, let's see. Who'd they merge with? Not United.) They merged with U.S. West. U.S. West, is that what it's called?

CM: That is an airline, I don't know.

EILERS: Something like that, anyway.

CM: I'm not an [expert?] on airlines. [Laughs]

EILERS: Right. But their passenger services reps (representatives). And, of course, that law is a whole different law. That's the National Railway Act, and it covers all transportation, and it has different rules. You had to get 50% of all eligible employees to vote for the union, whereas in a normal election you have to get 50% of those voting. In *this* you had to get 50% of all eligible voters. So, it made it easier for the employer. And they went through two elections, actually one in the end, but we won by a majority of people voting but lost the first time. So I worked on that campaign towards the end of time I was working for the A.F.L.

CM: So, you retired, but as I happen to know there was a short [Inaudible] retirement.
[Laughs]

EILERS: That's right, that's right.

CM: I wonder if maybe this is the time to stop for this time and we'll pick up next time,
okay?

[End of Tape 6, Side 1]
[Tape 6, Side 2 BLANK]

Tape 7, Side 1
2011 November 2

CM: Jean Eilers' oral history, Carolyn Mathews, interviewer. We're in Carolyn's house, and it's November 2nd, 2011. So, we're going to go back for some of the details of some of the events in campaigns while you were with the A.F.L.-C.I.O. Sounds like you'd like talk about the Iraqi union [Inaudible] [on here?].

EILERS: Now granted, and I look at it this way. It was 2005, so that was probably the last year I was working with the A.F.L.-C.I.O.. But it was – I must say, it was inspired by – There was an organization, U.S. Labor Against the War,³⁹ that a group of union people had put together, and one of the things then was they made contact with Iraqi workers, and really the US occupation in Iraq had been terrible for the Iraqi workers that when Paul Bremer⁴⁰ (I think that was his name) was the person in charge of the occupation. And one of the things – and here comes the U.S. for freedom, supposedly – but in fact they kept in place these really terrible banning of unions that Saddam Hussein⁴¹ had put in place. And they supposedly did away with all these other terrible things of Saddam Hussein, and in fact they kept that, and so the workers organized and took a stand and actually were good, but they needed to get their voice heard out in this country and so a tour was planned. And this organization, U.S. Labor Against the War, brought them to the United States and then they went [to] various cities and they did a West Coast and came to Portland. And so, a group of us worked together to make that happen in Portland and to make that successful.

And it was really – there were lots of things about it that I remember enjoying doing. One was the meetings themselves, just facilitating them with this diverse group of union people

³⁹ U.S. Labor Against the War (U.S.L.A.W.) is a national organization of unions and other labor groups, originally organized in 2003 to oppose George Bush's threat to go to war against Iraq.

⁴⁰ Lewis Paul Bremer III (born in 1941) is an American diplomat. He led the Coalition Provisional Authority following the 2003 invasion of Iraq by the United States.

⁴¹ Saddam Hussein Abd al-Majid al-Tikriti (1937-2006) was an Iraqi politician who served as the fifth president of Iraq from 1979-2003.

to plan it, and then it was where they were going to speak, and what places would they go to visit during the time they were here, and where would they stay, and then we had to set up and provide for translation and find people to be translators. It was also a very – a great outreach thing to do.

CM: Were the workers in any – did they place themselves in any jeopardy by making this trip? Jeopardy at home?

EILERS: Right, right. I don't know the answer completely to that, Carolyn. I think they certainly – there were different times. I remember there were issues around getting their visas and getting them here. I also know – Bob Marshall, who (I forget who he was working with at the time and whether he was still working with A.F.S.C.M.E. or if he was working with S.E.I.U. at that point), but at any rate (or maybe he was working with A.F.T. [American Federation of Teachers]). At any rate, he was very much involved and very engaged in this and did a lot of the outreach, and recently he had been listening – he told me was listening to some reporting from Iraq and heard one of the workers who had come was actually speaking in this program. So, they were safe, and it's this sort of thing we didn't know when they went back and necessarily what happened and whatnot. They were oil workers, the ones that came to Portland, and there were two of them, and we put on a forum at Portland State, and they spoke, and it was really very moving. Their main message was "Thank you but we don't like Saddam Hussein either, but it's our job to get rid of him, not yours, thank you." So, that was the message they wanted to get out basically, and it was just so good to hear their voices and meet them as people, and their concern for work is no different than workers in this country concern for the work and the work that they do and having a voice in that work in their own country.

Then we went out to some Longshore site was the other thing that I vaguely remember. I have this whole folder, and it's funny, I find myself I can't throw things away. There's no reason for me to keep this at all, but I'd had the picture that appeared in the *Oregonian*, and we had a nice article in the *Oregonian* because there was a visiting writer

from Colorado (I think) and somehow he came, wrote up the story and it appeared in the *Oregonian*. Otherwise, I don't think it would ever been there.

But I have a 101 copies (I guess) of the statement that the workers – after doing this tour they went back to D.C., and then together put together a statement of what they stood for and why they came and what they wanted to do and what they wanted to the United States in terms of needing their country. “The bedrock to any democracy is a strong, free, democratic labor union. We commit ourselves to strengthening the bonds of solidarity and friendship between working people of our two countries. We call for the cancellation of Saddam’s massive foreign debt by the I.M.F. [International Monetary Fund]. The national wealth and resources of Iraq belong to the Iraqi people. We strongly and unambiguously condemn terrorist attacks on civilians and targeting the trade union and other civil society leaders for intimidation, kidnapping, torture, and assassination and the principal obstacle to peace, stability and the resurrection of Iraq is the occupation.”

“The occupation is the problem not the solution. Iraqi sovereignty and independence must be restored. The occupation must end in all its forms, including military bases and economic domination.”

This should be revived!

CM: Yes. Did you say you have many copies?

EILERS: I have many copies of this, yeah. And will put...

CM: We'll put that with the collection.

EILERS: Right. The other thing is just how many people, how many different unions we had reached out to that we included in this, so we had a good representation here in Portland. And it was a very successful evening at Portland State as I recall. So, I think that's kind of what I have to say. I just remember the whole experience fondly. You know, it's not just – it is when we get to meet people, right?

CM: I remember the event. I didn't go, but I certainly remember reading about it, and knowing that it was happening. And I heard about it on the radio, KBOO probably. Well, the other thing that I noticed in these articles, in particular was a demonstration in Wells Fargo Bank Portland and San Francisco. Kind of complicated connection between Oregon Steel and Wells Fargo and [another company name?]...

EILERS: Pueblo, Colorado, that's right.

CM: Do you want to describe that more?

EILERS: This was – the plant in Pueblo, Colorado was an Oregon Steel plant. It was owned by Oregon Steel, whose principal offices were here. And they went out on strike over, oh, I think many issues. It was their contract negotiations, and as part of an attempt to get a good contract they really targeted the headquarters here in Oregon, and so they came to Oregon. And Wells Fargo, I think, was funding probably Oregon Steel in some way or was the bank engaged. And so there were – there was a woman organizer named Libby (whose last name I can't remember at the moment) who was here in Portland and working on this campaign. And there were workers who came from Colorado. There were several workers who came and stayed here in Portland to help organize the activities and whatnot. Nick Michotich was about 10 feet tall. I guess a little less but he's very big. A wonderful, wonderful presence! And then there were others, but Nick – people remember Nick, and he was here probably longer than others. And it was a series of different kinds of activities that were done.

I vaguely remember a Wells Fargo chariot in some sort of demonstration that we had. But another was actually sit-ins in the Wells Fargo banks, and it was – I called Father Bob Kruger and John (Reverend John) Rogers, who is (I believe) a Lutheran minister, and some others, and asked if they wanted to be arrested. And Father Bob true to his good –

he checks his calendar and no, he's not doing anything else that day, [Laughs] so if this is needed he believes in the cause. That seems right; he guessed he could do that.

CM: And was he arrested?

EILERS: And so they were. And he definitely blames me for it. [Laughs] But he – and he often – there were several people arrested who did the sit-in, and I wasn't there. I was in San Francisco actually. We had a West Coast A.F.L.-C.I.O. meeting, and I had to be in San Francisco. We actually were arrested in San Francisco for the same thing, sitting-in in the Wells Fargo Bank. And the interesting thing to me about the small world, when I was in San Francisco and I'm in the paddy car and it's kind of dark and we're taking – went off to jail, the person next to me was Ellen Starbird, who I had worked with in the Farm Workers in Coachella. I hadn't noticed her when we were sitting in the bank, but there we were. But Father Bob got arrested with several other people, and I know his comment was, "Everybody else seemed to think this was fun, but I didn't think it was fun." But there he was, doing it for good. And Nick, Nick Michotich, one Labor Day spoke at the St. Andrew Church, the labor in the pulpit, and he was so touched by the whole experience. He always came to church after that, and he would sit in the back, and you'd always see Nick in the church at St. Andrews every Sunday. There's both appreciation for his – and the connection between [Inaudible].

CM: What was the outcome of this strike? This is in 19 – well, the article was November 1997.

EILERS: That's probably about when it was, too, as I remember. Another time we were arrested. I was arrested in Portland because women came, wives of some of the strikers from Pueblo came to Portland to try to meet with the C.E.O. of Oregon Steel. And he wouldn't meet with them, so we ended up sitting in, in the building – it's the 1000 building

on Broadway. It's been the scene of other sit-ins, the Parry Center⁴² as a matter of fact. People chained themselves to the pillars, and then they brought the firemen in to undo the chains and remove us and arrest us and we went to...

CM: [Inaudible].

EILERS: Right. It's interesting; what are the outcomes of this all? (It's like I don't remember! I remember all the activities, I remember how much we all grew, how close we came.) It did get settled, and they did get a contract, and I think what happened is (if I remember rightly) is the owner of Oregon Steel was replaced. Now, there are two things that are mixed up in my mind, whether some company bought Oregon Steel out (and I can't remember if it was at that time and then he got replaced, but I sort of think he got replaced first) and then they got a settlement. And then I think Oregon Steel later on got bought out by a company from someplace else. I think that's the order of – and it got settled when they got a new C.E.O. Settled the outstanding issues.

But people had lots of stories of – and the ones that stick in my mind are the guy who got hurt on the job, and does the company take him to the hospital? No, he has to call a cab – to go the hospital to, you know, he had a finger sawed, cut off or something, but just think in this day and age what's done for profit!

CM: When you say that sometimes you don't remember the outcome, what you remember is how people grew and that is just as important.

EILERS: That's like Nick, right.

CM: There are other outcomes besides a contract, that act sort of as seeds, perhaps, for future things.

⁴² The Parry Center for Children, part of Trillium Family Services, is a 24-hour psychiatric residential treatment facility in Southeast Portland.

EILERS: That's right, and people's own sense of taking charge of their life, and standing up often for the first time – happens in this process. So, it was a very interesting, active campaign. I think it was sort of out of that then the – what year was the W.T.O. [World Trade Organization]?

CM: 1999.

EILERS: 1999. So, the Steelworkers and the – developed this whole relationship with the environmentalists, and then they together protested in the W.T.O.

CM: How 'bout talking about the W.T.O. then?

EILERS: That was – and, again, it was great to – 'cause the A.F.L. was very supportive and very much engaged and involved in...

CM: Maybe we should briefly explain...

EILERS: Oh, what is W.T.O..

CM: [For the two people who don't know?] [Laughs] We know now what the W.T.O. is. It was a big deal in Seattle.

EILERS: Right. Well, the World Trade Organization – and this was not its first meeting or the first protest. But I think it's the first time it was held in the United States; I think is what big about it that year, and it was going to be in Seattle. And so there was planned, big planned demonstrations in Seattle for this. There were many, many groups coming. And the A.F.L. was supportive from D.C., and there obviously were going to be speakers

at this assembly. (I'm trying to remember.) It was in a big stadium; I can't remember the stadium.

CM: It's mentioned in one of these articles I've got here. Memorial Stadium or something.

EILERS: Right, right, anyway. My job was helping the buses park and get people, then geared into the right places, so I feel like I didn't see the whole – I was in Seattle, right. We went up to Seattle. But a lot of it before that was organizing groups. The local Oregon A.F.L.-C.I.O. was very supportive. They actually bought train tickets or rented cars on trains, and people from Portland went on these trains, which was very fun and very communitive, community-oriented. And then there were buses also. Jobs With Justice had several buses that they were sending up to Seattle. And so, the buses all had to be parked, and the train had to be met, and people had to get from the train to wherever this was, this stadium. And so, there were many levels of things going on in terms of activities because there was a whole set of people who had done a lot of training for nonviolent resistance and preparation and were actually arrested. And I know Jobs With Justice was very involved in a lot of those activities. And it sort of identifies the outrageousness of the issues of people suffering while corporations made big money. It was pretty amazing to see – I don't know the article probably mentioned numbers of people.

CM: There were very large numbers. [Laughs]

EILERS: Right, right, 'cause it was just huge, and it was – and seeing the variety of people that came. There was one person, I think of John Loomis, who's a carpenter, and he said, "Well, my union told me I should go to the W.T.O., and my church told me I should go to the W.T.O., so I thought I'd better go." [Laughs] So, I think it was, again, for many, many, many people it was a first time taking a stand, being part of such a large action. And people talk about it today as their start or their change or the protest that defined who they are and what they continue to do.

CM: Hard to believe it was that long ago, 11 or 12 years ago now! And people still remember it.

EILERS: Right, right.

CM: And the resulting [Inaudible] shutting them down, didn't it? Wasn't the W.P.O. [meeting?]

EILERS: I think so. There was something very dramatic about what happened, and again I seem to have no memory of results. [Laughs] Tell you all the details, but – always process, right? No, it was definitely significant. We would never hold it again in Seattle.

CM: [Thirty-second long inaudible question].

EILERS: Right, right. One of the things we did – I think I found these the other day, too. When people were coming back on the bus, we asked them to write down something about their experience. And so we have all these little scraps of paper, really, that people wrote on their day and what that meant and being a part of that.

CM: They still exist somewhere?

EILERS: They do exist somewhere, I believe, I think it was another thing I couldn't quite throw away.

CM: [Inaudible] It was more than [one day?]?

EILERS: I think the main protest was one day because people came up on the train and they went back on the train that night. And the buses came up for a day and then went

back. I remember trying to make that decision of whether Michela should come. She's in seventh grade, maybe? Eighth grade maybe? Or not. You know, what was going on school and – she didn't come. Sometimes I think, you know, probably should've.

CM: Did Bob come?

EILERS: He did, yeah, he came. We went up the night before because we were going to meet the buses and park buses. I still have, actually, a hat that says "Monitor," an orange monitor hat from the W.T.O.. So, it certainly marked a place on – it registered, you know, the films that came out afterwards. So, it's hard for me to – what was the specific stuff that changed the W.T.O.? They certainly saw they couldn't get away with just doing their things in secret, that there were eyes on them, and people who weren't going to accept it.

CM: [Inaudible] [I wonder if some of that?] the seeds of that, we're seeing now in [Inaudible] occupations around the country? Occupy Wall Street, Occupy [Inaudible]?

EILERS: Right, right.

CM: [Inaudible]

EILERS: Right. And I think I would – right. It's another movement and people believing in taking action. It's interesting to hear Father Bob talk about these things, actually. And that's what he feels. He has felt, "We need action. We don't need more lectures. We need more action, and this looks like action, and maybe this is another movement." He reads all these books, and so he can tell you about the last movements [and what they were?].

CM: One of these articles that talks about Father Bob in the Wells Fargo sit-in suggests that you were instrumental in influencing him to become active and that was the impression I got. Was that [it was] his first action and that's what got him started.

EILERS: I guess that's probably true. It was early on. The first thing I remember with Father Bob and getting Father Bob's engagement really in – 'cause he knew the history of the Catholic Church's social teachings et cetera, so it wasn't like he didn't understand that. And he'll talk about when he was in high school actually. It was during the time when Monsignor Tobin⁴³ was alive, and he did a lot in terms of labor. He brought – he did labor mediation; he had some sort of industrial school in which – and so the kids that went to Central High School and Father Bob being one of them, they would go and attend these workshops and things that he had. And so he had learned the Catholic history of labor involvement.

CM: Was Father Tobin in Portland...

EILERS: Yeah, he was a Portland priest and probably taught at Central. He was a pastor at All Saint Catholic Church. But the first thing I remember with Father Bob was – no, I was working for 503, [Inaudible] for 503 at the time, and we were organizing Waverly Children's Center [Inaudible]. And then I was actually leaving 503 and a new organizer Susan Kochy was hired . So, [Inaudible] So, one of the things...

[End of Tape 7, Side 1]

⁴³ Monsignor Thomas J. Tobin (1897-1978) played an important role in Portland's labor and civil rights movements and in the Catholic community in western Oregon.

Tape 7, Side 2
2011 November 2

EILERS: So, this meeting with Father Bob with Susan Kochy. I remember at some point, he leans down, puts his hands on his head and says, “The unions just have to get stronger.” And what I understood in that moment was his great concern for people, whether they were his parishioners or not, but his great concern was the dignity of people, that they have work that is dignified, and that’s what that statement said to him. I’ve always remembered it, and I’ve always been so inspired by it, really, the sort of depth at which he understood. So, did I give him the opportunities to act out on this feeling that he had in wanting to help to make unions stronger? Yes, I certainly have given him many opportunities, and so that’s what he sort of teases about, that I really had him involved in it.

CM: The opportunity to get arrested? [Laughs]

EILERS: I know it, really. And talk about it. And it was early on. I do remember thinking when Leslie (I think her name’s Leslie), the steelworker, wanted this to be the activity, and I’m thinking, “You know, that sounds like an ultimate. Is that going to be the first action we had people do?” But it wasn’t my decision; it was their campaign and their decision to do this, and she’s just asking me to find some people who might participate, so that’s how Father Bob got asked, and was up to him to say “No,” he wasn’t going to do it. But he didn’t, he said “Yes,” to his credit, and the same with John Rogers.

CM: I know that at other times you’ve mentioned your admiration for several labor priests. We’ll talk about some of these others, too, as we get to the different campaigns.

EILERS: Right, right, yeah no, it *is* great. Again, as an organizer, what you have to do is learn to ask people, and whatever it is in our society, we’re all so polite and we don’t like to really ask people and we give them a thousand reasons why they can say “No.” And it’s

learning – It's a person's – they can say "No." And I need not say it for them, and we need to give them the opportunity, and they're going to do things that they might not have done otherwise, but they're going to be better for it for the most part for having done these things, so it's...

CM: Yes, having been on the other side of that in the Providence campaign, I remember often having to decide "yes" or "no." [Inaudible]

EILERS: Right, right.

CM: And being asked very respectfully every time.

EILERS: Good.

CM: You mentioned the Waverly Center. Is that different from the Parry Center?

EILERS: Today, I believe they're the same. They're the Trillium Family Services (I think it's what it's called today) but at that point they were separate. Waverly was separate. And then the Parry Center was organized later, and, again, same sort of incredible struggle, and the anti-union sort of fighting people in these campaigns, and it's even – Parry Center, they first organized (I possibly was working with the A.F.L.-C.I.O., I think, at the time when they first organized). And people like Father Bob were there, went to negotiations and sat in and helped them in that way. And then, they had a strike, and I don't think it was over the first contract (if I remember rightly); it might have been over the second contract 'cause they continued their anti-union campaigns and whatnot. And it was a powerful strike in the middle of winter. [Laughs]

CM: I remember seeing them walking on the sidewalk and it was very cold.

EILERS: Right, right. They held out and, again, a lot of community support that was there, and they eventually got their contract and it was good. And then, they've had fairly easy negotiations until *this* time, and they're back at it. They hired the same anti-union firm they hired way back when they had the strike...

CM: This is going on now?

EILERS: This is going on now at Parry Center, and they – and it's so hard in these places because even though they have a contract and they keep getting slightly better wages, there's still a huge turnover in the industry, and it's a place where the company can talk to people, but the union organizers can't come in because of the privacy issues, obviously. So, just access to talking to members (and these are *members*, union members) can be very difficult in the whole struggle. Again, they're spending an incredible amount of money on this lawyer. This is taxpayer money, you know, this is money from the state for social services to serve these kids that they are spending to fight the union. So, that's going on now.

CM: Is this S.E.I.U. 503?

EILERS: Yes, right, right. They recently came to Jobs With Justice to the Faith Labor Committee to ask for support and help in sending a letter to – and then there was a delegation. Reverend Gene Ross and Lynn Smouse Lopez tried to deliver the letter, but they wouldn't see 'em, wouldn't talk to 'em. [Laughs] So yeah, that's still going on, and still, it's so outrageous in our times. You know, we talk about the Occupy Portland. All of this is connected. So, Parry Centers aren't corporations, and yet they act like them in fighting workers' rights.

CM: The Parry Center is not a corporation, did you say?

EILERS: It's a nonprofit organization, but...

CM: Like Providence is a nonprofit.

EILERS: That's right, you got it.

CM: Full disclosure will be coming later! [Both laugh]

The Kaiser strikes in 1997. The article that I saw didn't even describe the national partnership. It just sort of mentioned it, and I wondered if you'd like to define that. Does the Kaiser – the Kaiser union system is a little different from other places.

EILERS: Right. In 1997 I remember the strike, and it was – I remember being out on those picket lines and holding signs and meeting people and whatnot. And I think – I don't know the timeline on all the partnership, but there have been strikes in California in the Kaiser system and just battles with all of these hospitals in terms of workers just trying to get a voice. So, Kaiser really basically decided at some point we don't want to do this anymore, how do we form a partnership? And so, I don't know all the ins and outs of it with Local 49, because S.E.I.U. Local 49 represents the Kaiser workers we saw it, but it means there are much more joint committees, there's more room.

They actually have an agreement where workers work as contract specialists, and so they are – are actual Kaiser workers who are off the job, work out of the union office to resolve grievances before they get big and antagonistic and whatnot. And so, they really work at resolving problems, and so there are more meetings to resolve problems and set-ups about actually working things out with Kaiser. That ends up being a much smarter way to go. It's not that there aren't problems that don't happen all the time. And through one of my daughter's friends whose father is in management at Kaiser actually says, "Without the union we wouldn't treat the workers as well," and recognizes that. And so, I think that's what the partnership means.

CM: Who pays these contract people?

EILERS: Kaiser. 'Cause it's for their own benefit. You know, which is not an unusual thing. When I worked for the U.F.W/ (and I don't know if I mentioned this or not) in the lettuce industry they had clauses in their contracts that there would be a paid staff rep, and it would be one of the workers who then would really full-time work at resolving issues and problems and getting them settled, and developed amazing leaders in that process, too.

CM: So, this system, was this a first in the union among unions? This model that Kaiser had?

EILERS: That's a good question, Carolyn. I would not be surprised it is not a European model in some ways, or you had something in other countries that was more like that.

CM: Is this what I've heard call labor-management partnerships? Is this thing named?

EILERS: Well, it could be called that. I think, probably, and this just formalized...

CM: It's a structure for everyone to sit down and work out problems. My goodness! What a surprise! [Both Laugh]

EILERS: Right, I know it. I know.

CM: Well, there was a little thing I noticed. Locally, about the phone workers, Delores Huerta came in 2000 protesting legislation that would prohibit strikes and secondary boycotts and something about the guest worker laws? Is that anything that you...

EILERS: Well, I think (if I remember rightly) it was probably a state law, and she was up and worked with PCUN,⁴⁴ because U.F.W. had a nice relationship with PCUN, and I think Delores came up for that. And wasn't that the year of the big marches, immigrant marches? Do you remember?

CM: Exactly, 2000, yeah, yeah.

EILERS: It seems to me a lot of activity was happening around that, and then I remember a big march in Salem and Delores being there. Her son actually was going to school, I think, at the University of Oregon. Rickie. And she also spoke at the Tobin lectures. This is the Catholic Archdiocese. I mentioned Monsignor Tobin a little while ago. They have (every year) what's called the Tobin lecture, and it's because he most symbolized the whole Catholic social teaching, and it's kind of honoring that, and it's out at the – Peace and Justice Office in the archdiocese puts this on each year, and Delores was the speaker one year. And *this* year it's a man by the name of John Carr,⁴⁵ who works with the United States Catholic Conference of Bishops, and it's tonight.

CM: Are you going?

EILERS: I am going. And, Carolyn, you might remember, the documents "Fair and Just"⁴⁶ documents that came out of – well, John Carr was one who worked on those and tried to keep bringing the hospital association together with the unions under the bishops to come up with those documents.

CM: Very good writing in that. [Inaudible].

⁴⁴ Pineros y Campesinos Unidos del Noroeste (in English, Northwest Treeplanters and Farmworkers United), more commonly known by the acronym PCUN, is the largest Latino union in the U.S. state of Oregon

⁴⁵ John Carr serves as Executive Director of the Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development at the United States Catholic Bishops' Conference

⁴⁶ *A Fair and Just Workplace: Principles and Practices for Catholic Health Care.*

EILERS: But the unfortunate part of that there is no mechanism for enforcing any of that. So, there they are, lovely words. That's the other – I don't know unless this fits into the religion part, but the Peace and Justice Office of the Vatican has come out with an excellent article, statement around the disastrous state of the financial systems worldwide that are just creating more and more inequality and inhumaneness to people and actually try to recommend some global regulation and ways to regulate the finances. But just fits into all the Occupy Movement issues that are happening. But the challenge, of course, is we can write all we want. And that's why Occupy Portlands are so important, why the W.T.O. was important. It's the feet in the street. And it's just very interesting to watch who supports this Occupy movements and who are uncomfortable with it and who...

CM: [What people have?] you noticed so far with the groups?

EILERS: Well, I think, you know, listening to people like Nick Fish and his worry about how much money it's going to cost the city and that comment that's always out there. I admire Sam Adams, he's taken and, I think, they've got important things to say. Maybe that's the joy of being – he's not running again.

CM: For mayor.

EILERS: Right, right. So, I think that's it. The people who are theoretically, "Well, if they can do it, then anybody's going to be able to. How do we draw the line?" I just find those kinds of comments interesting, and then I find the people are, "Now, go on down there." We – there was a Portland Rising,⁴⁷ which is a J With J activity bringing unions together to work on each other's campaigns. In our October 6th (I think it was) we had a march across the Interstate Bridge from Portland to Vancouver, because the Vancouver Hilton is a place

⁴⁷ Portland Rising began as a project of Jobs with Justice in 2011 with a rally joining a variety of union and community campaigns under the broad theme of Good Jobs, No Cuts.

that's in struggle right now along with the Longshore and other Vancouver things together with good old Georgia Pacific (the Koch Brothers' Georgia Pacific). Occupy Portland endorsed that march and joined us, and there was a bus that came and joined us for the march across the bridge and whatnot. And what I found very interesting was the ability to – I talked to several people, and one of the people was a man who goes down to Occupy Portland every night from 11 to two because he has a background in mental health, and there're many people who have mental health problems who are in the downtown area and so he goes to just calm down people and talk with people.

So, it's that sort of support and that sort of belief. There was another man. I asked him "Why are you here at the march today?" and he said, "Well, you know, I believe in all the things the Occupy Portland is doing and I think they're so important. I just can't camp out, but I came to be part of this."

And then, there are other people that are down there figuring out how to get meals, how to just provide support and belief, because it's so articulate about what their exact problem is, the one percent and the 99%, and what's happened with the whole financial. So, how did I get here?

CM: I don't know, but it's been very interesting. [Both laugh]

EILERS: I know, right, well, let's see, it was, I'm trying to think where I left on...

CM: I think it's just movements in general, people doing what they believe in. Just the details that go back to last time, you mentioned a contract issue in the rolling strike by the state workers in 1997 was resolved, and I was wondering if you remembered what that main contract...

EILERS: My guess, Carolyn (and this is funny, since I'm not going to remember these outcomes) is I think it must have been certainly a financial settlement that was resolved. And the reason I remember the financial settlement so much is my daughter was in

preschool at the time, and she – we had a march in Salem, and then she and other organizer Michael Alexander’s daughter Audrey was also in the same preschool, and they got back and they organized their little preschool kids into a march, and they marched around and they said, “Hey, Neil, pay the rent, hey, Neil, two percent won’t pay the rent, hey, Neil, three percent won’t pay the rent.” So, they did all their numbers. [Both laugh]

CM: Neil Goldschmidt.

EILERS: Governor, exactly. And I think it was the percent; the wage was the issue, right.

CM: So, that made me wonder if you have seen any shift or trends in what contract issues are over the years. Do they tend to always be the same thing like a raise in pay? Certainly health insurance recently was a big one.

EILERS: Right, health insurance has certainly risen and been more major, I would say. I think the whole tightening of the economy obviously has made it much harder. There’ve been take-backs, and people have been willing to do take-backs to maintain their contracts. It’s really how much respect there is for workers makes a difference. I just think like right now with Xerox. S.E.I.U. 49 represents the workers out in Wilsonville at the Xerox plant there, and they’ve just been in negotiation and the company came in, and, again, it’s because of the times that the companies feel like, “Oh, workers are so few organized and the numbers are down now’s – and there are so many unemployed – so now’s our time to just go after workers.” And so, they wanted to take away all five sick days from the workers; they wanted to take 50% wage decrease of certain workers; they wanted their disability – this group of workers gets 80% of their wages paid when they’re out for disability). They wanted to move that down to 60% even though the entire un-unionized group in the company get 100% disability payment.

So, it's these times are amazing. I guess that's why it makes me want to go back and talk about the issues that the Occupy people – “*These* are the issues.” It's just outrageous, the corporations. And then, I read in the *New York Times* that Xerox makes 28 percent profit the last quarter. And then, the organizer told me – the day of the ra– they finally came and resolved some issues. They held the company back with a lot of demonstration activities like Xerox has never seen before, from the group of organized workers, but they were down to this disability issue. They wanted them to go down to 60%, and they finally worked it out so that at least in this contract that would not be put into effect. And then they can wait and see whether – ‘cause they're saying, “Oh, well, the rest of the company's going to be going to this, so we'll wait and see next time around.” But the thing the company did, the day of ratification, out comes the newspaper article online to all the workers, that they had made all this profit. You know, talk about just the lack of sensitivity, and yet they're going after taking all this money to be more profitable. And that's their reasoning, to be more profitable.

So, around contract issues, they – different times make different issues (I would say to certain degrees) but it's mostly the dignity issues and what really, really will get to people. There's a point at which “We're just not going to take it.” Going on strike or voting for a strike is a very scary thing.

CM: Having a voice on the job. Is that a negotiating point? I'm just thinking that with the shift in union philosophy from a service model to the organizing model, if maybe having a voice on the job has increased in visibility in terms of what workers want.

EILERS: The organizer that was telling about these Xerox workers? That one of the things they said to their coworkers, “We need to stay organized; it's very important that we continue and that we're ready for the next time ‘round.” So, they certainly had a new sense of the importance and significance of their role and their having a voice. And it's hard, for example, to talk about a Parry Center. With turnover, with people who haven't been through a kind of struggle or seen a specific thing, come in, and it's easy for the companies

to exploit that, “Oh, you just pay union dues. You’d make more money if you didn’t have to pay your union dues” kind of thing. So, what it is when workers really realize the difference. To talk about the Providence campaign – I know someone who’s kind of a family friend who worked at Providence in a role actually in the chaplain’s office, but during the time we were organizing, wasn’t against it but really didn’t see much point, didn’t feel like, “You know, this [may be?] something I’d need” at all until he had an incident and found out how awful it was to be called in to have a client tell a story and they believed *their* word against *your* word and to not have a representative or not even know what your rights or process would be. And it was a devastating experience for this person and just totally gave them a whole new understanding.

And so it’s hard ‘cause not everybody’s ever going to have that awful experience and how to help people understand that and have a community sense of “Maybe I’ll never have this, but I need to make sure that nobody else does either.”

CM: Increasingly I think people are having these moments, though.

EILERS: Right.

CM: Just catching up on another detail from last time. Working with D.M.V. people while you were at 503 that it was interesting...

EILERS: Well, I think – D.M.V. was a department within ODOT, a small department when you look at ODOT and who most of the workers of ODOT are, they’re the highway workers et cetera...

[End of Tape 7, Side 2]

Tape 8, Side 1
2011 November 2

EILERS: It's interesting, their issues were often quite different from those of the road crews and how to express 'em, and so that part was just very interesting (trying to work those things and get their issues heard when they were at the what would be the ODOT table to negotiate issues for theirs). And then the funny part was at St. Andrews a couple years ago. One day I went to the RCIA, which is the initiation when people want to come into the Catholic Church, and they are – St. Andrews does a very nice job of integrating and having them meet other people and just have people come and talk. And so, I'd been invited to come and meet with them; they meet during the Mass, actually. So, I went out and we introduced ourselves and people were introducing themselves and someone said, "But I know you 'cause I worked at D.M.V. and you were the rep!"

CM: So, they were issues – they were office workers.

EILERS: Yeah, they're much more office workers, right. You know, they had to do test drives, and that had its whole set of issues, but it's just a different type work, different – obviously different issues that come up in terms of work issues.

CM: Were they a part of the same bargaining unit as all ODOT people were?

EILERS: Yes. Right, right, right. And then Mary Bodkin. Mary obviously has had a very influential A.F.S.C.M.E. career, in politics, is well known in lots of things she's done. When I first met Mary was right after I had become the state director for the A.F.L.-C.I.O.. Was at a meeting – I believe the meeting was in Salem for some reason – and we were encouraging people to come to this strawberry march in support of strawberry workers in Salinas, California. And there was going to be a day and people coming from all across the country to gather in Salinas in support of these strawberry workers there. And Mary did not like that. She felt my job was to be – they were in a struggle with Fairview and that my job

was to be organizing around Fairview. And so, I said, "Well, Mary, what's your plan?" I just never felt she ever wanted to have much to do with me in my role. And I don't know what that was about or whatnot.

CM: So, she continued with Fairview and you continued with the strawberry people.

EILERS: Right. You know, I ran into her on occasion but not a lot.

CM: Well, is there anything else you would like to say about your A.F.L.-C.I.O. career before we draw it to a close? [Laughs] [Inaudible].

EILERS: Right, exactly. Well, when I think about it, part of it was thinking about the Iraqi workers. What a joy that was to actually have that whole experience and be a part of that. I also worked on organizing the passenger service reps for America West Airlines, and that was very fun work to do and good work to do. But a lot of the time – you know, you mentioned union cities when it was this whole new era with John Sweeney and having state directors was a whole new kind of thought and process. And I'm not sure I was ready for it. It was a bit overwhelming to me. It reminds me of when I went from the Farm Workers to working for a real union where they paid real wages; I made sure everybody knew all these things that I didn't know. And so, here I was now in a situation going from working from one union where I knew how to deal with that and do that, but how do you work in this situation where you're dealing with many unions and the hope was to transform out of the service model into organizing model and that we would have more movement workers.

And I was unprepared for how people are entrenched in the ways they do things. And I didn't have the experience, I think, to be as tactful in being able to value people for what they had done and ways they had [worked]e. (And, you know, now that I'm so old and wise, right, Carolyn, now I would know much better how you help people move! [Laughs]) You know, that whole change thing is a very scary thing. And so, it was hard; it was a very different kind of milieu to walk into. And there were the Progressives who expected you to

make all these changes, and then there were all the others who – as a matter of fact, there was one other, the head of the trades, reported me to the boss that I was a Communist. [Laughs] So, you know, there was that whole gamut of trying to bridge through what you do in that whole milieu and era. And, in the end you have S.E.I.U. pulling out of the A.F.L.-C.I.O.. So, there was a real break, then the whole change to win unions.

CM: Did that happen while you were there?

EILERS: Right at the end, [yes]. So, it was a privilege really to have the work and certainly opened my eyes to lots of things I would never have seen and people I got to meet and to try – the ability to have a broader perspective of the Labor Movement and out of just one silo of service employees and seeing steelworkers, meeting steelworkers, meeting teamsters, working with the teamsters on these airline campaigns.

CM: So, retirement started looking kind of tempting?

EILERS: Well, what happened really is the A.F.L.-C.I.O. was going to lay off a lot of people, and you can take layoff (now, it's going to get fuzzy). There were definitely going to be layoffs. They were cutting away from the whole state directors and that whole system was changing. And there were some positions left or you could (and I really wanted to) – I didn't want to continue to work for A.F.L.-C.I.O.. And it turned out timing-wise perfect, because I turned 65 and could retire as opposed to resigning. So it all worked out. Great.

CM: Well, is there...

EILERS: And then two months later I went to work for Local 49, S.E.I.U.

CM: So, what was happening in these two months? Were you just chomping at the bit?
[Both laugh]

EILERS: Probably just cleaning up stuff from before, and beginning to get engaged, right?

CM: So, were you looking for something or did S.E.I.U. 49 just fall in your lap somehow?

EILERS: Kind of combination of that, right. 'Cause there was a plan that I probably could work for S.E.I.U. Local 9288, which was merging with 925, and so they needed someone to work through partly that merger and so there was some sense that maybe I was the right person to do that. (This is the Vancouver local.) But it just seemed a lot more interesting to me to work on the Providence campaign than do work in Washington.

CM: A little bit about Alice Dale. She had moved from 503 to 49 in the interim, right?

EILERS: That's right.

CM: Do you know why that happened?

EILERS: Why did Alice move? I think she felt like she'd done enough with the state at that point. [Laughs] 49 was about to be trustee-ed, clearly needed help, and I think for Alice it was seen feeling a bit like the state local could run itself. The issues were going to be the same issues that they always had. But, you know, it had grown immensely under Alice, so it was a big union now. Had enough, and that she wanted to work with a private sector union and saw 49 needed to grow, needed to – I mean, there was need in the state for hospital workers who weren't organized. And I think that's why she moved.

CM: Do you know why 49 was about to go into trusteeship?

EILERS: I don't know all the details. They had an executive director who was a very nice person, had been a member but just wasn't competent for the job, just didn't have the experience needed to really move a local like that and deal with the issues they would have to deal with.

CM: It must have been during that time that the first effort to organize Providence occurred.

EILERS: Before Alice was...

CM: Yeah. I think so. [Inaudible]

EILERS: Yes, I think it was before Alice was there. I was with the A.F.L.-C.I.O. actually.

CM: My impression was that it was a very weak effort.

EILERS: It was mostly among maintenance, and they got a lot of intimidation.

CM: Yes, clerical. But there was very little opportunity (I felt) to understand what was going on, and it didn't last very long?

EILERS: Right, right.

CM: So, you were drawn into the Providence campaign and it really got going.

EILERS: That's right.

CM: So, do you want to start talking about that now or...

EILERS: Why don't we wait for that? That's a long story, Carolyn!

CM: Well, we can wind up for today then.

EILERS: Okay.

2011 November 9

[The session recorded on November 9, 2021, is restricted until January 1, 2032]

[End of Tape 8, Side 1]

Tape 8, Side 2
2011 November 9

[The session recorded on November 9, 2021, is restricted until January 1, 2032]

[End of Tape 8, Side 2]

Tape 9, Side 1
2011 November 9

[The session recorded on November 9, 2021, is restricted until January 1, 2032]

[End of Tape 9, Side 1]

Tape 9, Side 2
2011 November 9

[The session recorded on November 9, 2021, is restricted until January 1, 2032]

[End of Tape 9, Side 2]

Tape 10, Side 1
2011 November 16

CM: Oral history, continuing with Jean Eilers; it's November 16th, 2011, and we're in Carolyn's house on a rainy, blustery fall day.

So, Jean, you've kind of looked over some of what we've done before and would like to clarify some things, is that right?

EILERS: But I didn't bring my little "jog my memory list," so...

CM: Oh, okay. Well, we can do that next time then. Okay, let's proceed then. Did you get the e-mail that I sent about suggested topics?

EILERS: I did, right.

CM: I was wondering about, if you wanted to describe a little bit in detail about the Faith Labor Committee of the [Jobs With] Justice [organization]. It seems to, in a way represent the intersection in your life of faith and labor which you've worked in both worlds for so many years, and it has quite an active presence here in Portland. So, would you like to talk in detail about that?

EILERS: Right. I think its origin sort of started many, many years ago, and I remember Susanne Wall, who was an organizer with S.E.I.U. 503. And for some reason kind of the idea of having a faith labor breakfast came up. And so, we did that, and it seemed like a really good idea, to bring people from the faith community who had an interest and whatnot together at least once a year. And Jobs With Justice was a perfect kind of organizer for that. And I don't think then that it – there was that time, and I had the feeling that it wasn't, like, the next year that it got started. This year is going to be the 10th annual of when Jobs With Justice actually –for the past 10 years – has annually held a faith labor breakfast. And, again, my only memory is kind of about breakfast was probably the thing that started the

idea. And then obviously to put a breakfast on, you kind of need a committee. And I think that's pretty much how the committee got started, and then eventually sort of identified itself with two goals. And one is the faith labor breakfast, which is held annually and has grown over the years with the concept of bringing faith and labor to the table to share conversations the values that they have around work and workers. And then the second goal of the committee has been the labor in the pulpit or labor on the [bema?] or labor in the (can't remember all the other names).

There's the Muslim or Jewish tradition or places that have pulpits, the Christian churches. And some of that was formulated and articulated by the Interfaith Committee for Worker Justice, which is a national group located in Chicago. Kim Bobo has been director for many years. And they promote that well, promote also materials that people can use in – and then, the two kind of concepts of it. One is the preacher talks about that often in church congregations in their history, they have documents that have been supportive of labor and articulate their position around workers' right to organize. So one is to have the leader of the religious congregation to talk about it; talk about those connections. Another is to actually bring a worker to talk in the church on their experience and sharing who they are and what they do and for the congregations to figure out how that represents who they are.

And then we've really thought of it in many ways and have done different things. I think it was a great opportunity during the Providence campaign where we really reached out to and I still – my books, I have those documents are in the office – but there were, oh, I would say at least 25 different congregations and churches where we did something, which was either have a worker preach during the sermon time or at – be available afterwards, have a forum afterwards, and, Carolyn, you know these well since you participated in a couple of them at least. So, those are – and then we usually do it around Labor Day 'cause Labor Day's come to mean the excuse for someone to say, "This is why we're talking about this." But we've also felt like it doesn't need to limit itself to Labor Day, and certainly during the Providence campaign we could not have done – handled 32 churches on one weekend! So, it was better to spread it out, and it fits in in other times and

in other ways. Other times we met with peace and justice committees of congregations. When we have a campaign going, there's a specific ask for people to sign onto a letter or make phone calls or support in a variety of different ways. So, those are the two (for me, it's like, "Okay, those are our two main things, and we need to put all our energy into them).

And then, different things come up during the year sometimes that they try to pull us into, and the breakfast always leads to this question of "We have all these people that came to the breakfast; they're very interested, but how many people can't come in the middle of the day to a meeting?" which is when the Faith Labor meets once a month and it's at noon. "So, let's have an evening meeting." And we've done different evening meetings, and they've been more or less successful. I think more just sort of tweaking people's interest, but I wouldn't say that they've produced many more people who wanted to become part of the committee, for example. But it's a good place to bring together some very good faith people who – and one thing, and just kind of figuring out what the topic and theme's going to be for a breakfast is good discussion and a good – trying to figure that out. And then the whole outreach in thinking about who do we invite to this, and caring about – and we've gotten better over the years in getting the tables more mixed with workers and faith people as well as kind of a format, so that people are really engaged and it's not all just not talking at people and being very real in what goes on.

CM: The last breakfast I was at was maybe three years ago, and I was [helping?].

A THIRD VOICE: Was that the one on the [Russell?] campaign? The students – the United Students Against Sweatshops?

EILERS: Right. So, and it's also then the set of people who really come forth and are willing to be there to do different things, feeling they can make a difference. Father Bob, again, I often – like hearing about the fact that he was at City Council today testifying. And I didn't have any role in that; I didn't call him up and ask him to go! Clearly, other people have found Father Bob, and he's so responsive, too. 'Cause he so believes it.

He says “no,” it’s his calendar doesn’t fit, and I think if he doesn’t feel like the strategy is one he’s comfortable with, he would say “no.” But if it fits what he believes in, and it’s sometimes – I presume on him, I’ve seen and he didn’t feel well prepared for something – and he likes to be well prepared, if he’s going to have to talk to somebody.

CM: His presentations are [Inaudible] learn something from [every one of them?]

EILERS: Right. Joe was just saying that after, I guess, after the City Council meeting (maybe it was Nick Fish, I’m not sure) somebody asked to sit down with him because of exactly what you’re saying. They were so impressed by his, what he had put together, that they wanted to follow up on that and talk about that.

CM: I hope everything he said is written down somewhere and is going to be collected and published.

EILERS: I know, I know, Carolyn, I often – I look at Father Bob and – he walks every day, and so is just rigid about keeping his health as good as possible. And it just – I just would feel so bad the day we don’t have Father Bob in our midst. And I also want him to be honored because he’s so for the right reasons. We’re not honoring him because he’s a person with a lot of money who gave some money to do something. It’s – and St. Andrews has a Martin Luther King award that’s given every year for someone who most promotes in the spirit of Martin Luther King, and last year I wasn’t the only one, several people, I think identified Father Bob as the person who should be honored. And the year before the head of Precision Castparts had been honored, and I believe that...

CM: [Inaudible].

EILERS: Yeah, and again, I didn’t know how the workings – it’s not like we vote on this. It’s like a committee determines who gets this award. And I think he had given a lot of

money to a Catholic school, was what I think was the reason he got honored. But I didn't want to let that happen again. It did not strike me as what Martin Luther King. This man may have good intentions, et cetera, but I must say I still burn with his anti-union attacks at Precision Castparts and what they did to squelch that organizing drive many years ago, but...

CM: I'm very surprised that St. Andrews did this.

EILERS: Well, it's part of the problem of – there are different things get going by different groups of people and it's not necessarily coordinated with how everybody – At any rate they were more than happy and open to have Father Bob nominated the next year. And he came and accepted the award and was pleased by it because I think we touched on things he's proud of that he's done and that he stood for and that he believes in. He started – he needs to be interviewed, Carolyn. [Laughs] But he's – one of the things he did at St. Andrews was he had talked about racism and said, "You know, we've got a long way and we've got to start someplace, so I'm going to have a regular dinner with a group of people who are African American and others who are not," and that group has been meeting for, like, 15 years (I think) in order to address these issues. Now, did anybody else pick it up? I don't know of any other groups, maybe they have. But, yeah, no, he's really an amazing person! He's not the best of preachers in, oh, when sometimes you think of the people who galvanize you, and there're people that will [Inaudible]. The pastor many years ago that got St. Andrews kind of on its whole progressive and live-your-faith kind of role was Father Bert Griffin. And he was an eloquent speaker, and Father Bob isn't what you'd call an eloquent speaker. He is someone who's thought through so deeply the issues, and puts them out there. And they're so authentic to him.

CM: [Motive is content?].

EILERS: Yeah. Well, he's read a thousand books in preparation, and thousand dense books. [Laughs]

CM: Is he retired?

EILERS: He is sort of retired.

CM: [I guess?] what you'd call being retired [Inaudible].

EILERS: Right, and what he does, is St. Francis of Assisi Church has a woman who is – Valerie Chapman, who's the pastoral (I don't know what those titles are). Anyway, and obviously since she's a woman she can't say Mass and do those things, so Father Bob serves in that capacity. But he doesn't have to be in charge of the administration and the finances and all of that at the church.

CM: That touches on another subject I was curious about, the role of women [Inaudible] the Church [Inaudible] ?

EILERS: Right. I don't know if I said this before, but I remember being struck at St. Andrews in the past year, a woman spoke who has always in the church capacity, and talked about what a painful experience that was, because of just the whole role of women in the Catholic Church and its obvious limitations of what women can do and can't do. Can't be priests. And it's not about ordination [Inaudible] in spite of people saying they are when you can't be ordained, and yet feel called to the ministry. And anyway, listening to this woman called to that role, even though I'd been a nun, and for me that had been a whole liberating experience, which I think I spoke about before.

And the other is that I believe that working in S.E.I.U. in particular, in the places I was, women were leaders, and so, I had mostly great role models in women and in the roles they do play in the union. So, that's one place. When I worked in the A.F.L.-C.I.O., it –

the place where it's most challenging are the trades, which are much more male-dominated. But, again, there're wonderful organizations like Oregon Women's Trades Union [Oregon Tradeswomen]⁴⁸, and I don't know if they've ever been interviewed, but they're a wonderful group of women who really have worked at this whole issue that women do get called to be and want to be trade, working the trades, want to be electricians or want to be roofers or cement masons or what-have-you.

CM: In construction, yeah!

EILERS: But then, there're lots and lots of issues, because it is obviously dominated by men, and pretty much all men, and so that's a whole nother world of breaking in, too. And I never – I don't know that was because I didn't have the background, I never felt, when I worked for the A.F.L.-C.I.O. that I really ever could particularly communicate with most of those tradespeople, and the head of the Oregon Trades Council actually reported to my boss in Washington that I really was just a Communist.

CM: Oh. [Laughs] Then, how about at the Farm Workers?

EILERS: The Farm Workers, again, the role model of Delores Huerta, nobody put a stop or a leash or a harness on Delores! [Laughs] So, you had that, her role. And then there were other great women models, again, for me. I always think of – I think her name was [Esperanza] – her last name was Bravo, but I just can't quite put my hand on her first name. Anyway, she was head of one of the Farm Worker committees, and I think in the grapes, and she would come and lead that committee. Her husband would walk her to the office, sit out in the front office while the meeting was going on, she ran the meeting, and then he would walk her home. So, you know, I mean, they have their whole culture, and yet you saw wonderful Farm Worker women rising in roles.

⁴⁸ Oregon Tradeswomen was founded in 1989 to assist women with careers in the construction, manufacturing, mechanical, and utility trades.

CM: With people like Delores, was there criticism of such assertiveness within that culture?

EILERS: There's plenty of criticism of Delores, well deserved [Laughs], but was it criticism because she was doing these as a woman? I don't think so. I think she did wonderful things, and she accomplished wonderful things and she was an equal, and equally treated certainly by César, I think. And you know, I never heard Delores complain about this. There were other people that didn't like Delores, but that was based on other issues. I don't think it was gender or even – unless I was really naive.

CM: I'm thinking back to the S.E.I.U. situation because of the type of workplaces that S.E.I.U. organizes. So much of it is service industry, which has so many women in it. And it's just part of the changing face of the labor force.

EILERS: Right, although I think I'm right. Mary Kay Henry, who is now the international president, is probably the first woman to head S.E.I.U. at an international level, and she's great, she's a great person.

CM: Had she kind of worked up through the ranks, or where did she come from?

EILERS: Well, she did, I would say, but when Andy Stearn decided to step down, Anna Berger was the person to be his replacement, his successor, right, and a campaign was started by others for Mary Kay, really, and Mary Kay won in the end. Now, [Inaudible] a different woman, but it's a different – but Mary Kay was just recognized for all really the good, good work she had done as an organizer through the years.

CM: You were a co-chair of the Vatican II Committee?

EILERS: That has to do with One Spirit One Call [Inaudible].

CM: One Spirit One Call?

EILERS: One Spirit One Call, which grew out of – over a year ago, about a year-and-a-half ago, I guess – when someone in the Vatican sort of said that to speak in the Catholic Church about wanting women to be ordained was equivalent to pedophilia.

However. So, that created – wait a minute, this isn't right. There was a woman in Ireland, an older woman who was going to have a birthday on September 25 (I think it was) and she was, like, in her 80s I believe. So, she called for a boycott of Mass on that Sunday for women to stand up and say no. So, out of that kind of grew a group here who wanted to do something in the parks, in Shemanski Park in downtown Portland in the Park Blocks (the South Park Blocks), and the group actually made a decision not to highlight the boycott mass, people could go to Mass whenever they wanted, or not go to Mass if they didn't want to, but that wasn't the issue as much as bringing women together and honoring women and speaking right to the fact of the significance that they're equal, quite frankly. And what that experience had done for women also.

So, out of that – so there was that event on the 25th. Then they called for people to come to a meeting in November that was held at St. Charles, and in-between times they had sort of solicited circles of women to come and just talk about their experience and what issues arose out of those. And so, at this meeting in November following the event in the park, one of the themes that had kept rising was if only Vatican II had not – you know, there wasn't this pushback against it but had continued to evolve in the spirit that was started, we might well even be there in terms of women. And so, what's important is that – because the other thing we just discovered was those of us – it's like Vatican II was radicalizing from when you went to and it was all in Latin and the priest's back was to you and there were only boy altar boys saying "*Ad deum qui laetificat juventutem meam.*"⁴⁹ I can still say those words! Do I know what they mean? No. [Laughs]

⁴⁹ This Latin phrase translates as "To God, who gives joy to my youth."

To a lot of total changes, wonderful changes, not only in the immediate things that we saw a change of garb that sisters wore and the change in the masses in the vernacular. But there were *great* documents out of that, that really elevated the role of *people* and their *voice* in the Church and their authenticating anything that was to come from the Vatican or anyplace. And so, the liturgy things were developed and took place and were easy things for people to see. There was a wonderful labor committee in Chicago that was formed – I shouldn't say labor committee, it wasn't just labor, it was a Catholic laity group that was formed in Chicago, but they dealt with a lot of labor issues. And that was the kind of thing that came out because of the role of the laity and their significance and importance and they're the ones in daily life who are living it and so, if the Catholic teachings were going to be implemented in daily working life, then the laity had a huge role in this and in understanding that role and significance. So, those things were small in my mind and easy to get lost and not be kept alive.

And so, that's one of the things why we need to revisit Vatican II, but the other thing is – here's this whole set of people now growing up in the Church, who didn't have the experience that we had, of one thing to the other. They've only seen this one Church and so they saw it liturgically, saw the difference in the Mass and the liturgy. They probably heard sermons that were much more relevant than they used to be. If they went to Catholic schools, they may have been introduced to more of the Vatican II concepts, but not necessarily. And then there's this whole pushback, and there's been the drawback, and the kind of more conservative...

[End of Tape 10, Side 1]

Tape 10, Side 2
2011 November 16

EILERS: One of the committees that came out of this was the Vatican II Committee, and we had – so, a group of people that had been interested in, we’ve had a couple of people coming together and saying, “What do people need?” And different parishes are forming women’s groups; that’s another thing that’s kind of coming out of this One Spirit – to talk about what their experience as a woman in the church and what they really want it to be about. And so, we see that feeding those groups and helping those groups understand or get their hands on the right piece of literature or something that’s useful that comes from Vatican II. We had an assembly or called people with a presentation by Sister Kathleen McManus, who’s a professor at University of Portland, to talk a little bit about that at one, and then since then we’ve been trying to – we had another meeting not too long ago, which kind of came out – let’s – how do we put together some resources that can help either to start a group if people want to, or what they might use with their group to keep it alive.

CM: So this is ongoing.

EILERS: So, it’s ongoing, right.

CM: Terrific. The fact that Vatican II had a conservative subsequent time is news to me.

EILERS: Yeah no, it’s, yeah, it’s very interesting. Apparently there was a lot of resistance at the time, and you know, we’ve seen this in all kinds of politics, right?

CM: Well, this touches on another topic I was wondering about – your influence on other people, especially younger people, as you get older with all of this experience and sometimes it’s hard to know just what your influence is.

EILERS: Right. Well, I would say that – and it’s funny how – I feel like my most coming to who I want to be and who I am is really this last – what is it, five, six years since I started working with Local 49? Both that fit of being the community outreach person and (I don’t know), part of it is having retired from the A.F.L.-C.I.O., and then coming back, and I think I’ve talked about how feeling, when I went to the Farm Workers to working with A.F.S.C.M.E., it was like, oh, they were paid real money, and I wasn’t. When I worked with the Farm Workers, they must know more than I do, and those sort of always feeling, “I don’t know as much as all these people.” Until then! Then, it sort of came together and I started feeling, “I do know something. I have something here! [Laughs] So, (what do I want to say) it’s a much nicer way to work, when you’ve reached that stage of feeling like “Oh, I do know something.” So, I say that by way of – so, it was great, it was hard work working on the Providence campaign, the things we did, but it was also great work. We got to – at least my piece of it in terms of putting on the forums that we did, getting the people engaged, getting to spend some time with workers and having them tell their stories. And doing that, and trying in a million different ways we tried to influence and figure out how do we reach Providence.

CM: You said many times how much you like organizing, actually talking with real workers, and there was certainly plenty of that in the Providence campaign. It certainly made a difference to me as a worker to have all of this, to have people with all of this experience as organizers helping us through this. So, you had influence on people obviously! [Both laugh]

EILERS: So, anyway, so, and you never know, you know. It’s the kind of thing that often – and I think of this, the person who will thank me for doing something, I think, I actually did very little. It was the person themselves who was willing to put themselves forward, who got up and talked in the situation they’d never been in before, didn’t like, would never choose, but did it anyway because, and then they thanked me. So, it’s kind of ironic in my mind, but wonderful to see and just to be a part of people’s lives as that can

happen. And there is something to being older and gray-haired, and one of the nice things about 49 is they actually have a lot of young organizers who are wonderful people. And I often look at many of them, and they're very bright. Most of them, I'm sure, were top college students in many ways, and activists. And I think about, they could get jobs in our world that classifies the one percent and the 99%. They could be in top positions in many of these places, but they're not interested in that. They're really – I think of Anna and what drives her, it's the worker that she has the conversation with and...

CM: Anna?

EILERS: Anna Roberts. She works with Property Services. And Anna's just delightful, but to see her, she may be bargaining the contract for the janitors at Oregon State, and there's no length she won't go through to get herself prepared and to know all that she needs to know and then work with the workers and kind of making all the overtures that they're going to need to do in order to get there. And then being delighted when workers stand up on their own and start doing things. So, it's great to be in that setting and whatnot, and when I decided to retire in January and it was at a staff meeting and [may have?] shared this with our staff, and sort of spontaneously then, it was – people told their "Jean story" of, and the thing about –it was extremely, it was humbling, but it was – the stories people told were the ones that I would want people to – [Phone rings]

No, I don't need it. Could get it later; I could turn it off.

Were the stories of "That is the person I wanted to be" kind of thing. And so, Anna (who I was just talking about) said, first, she says, "You know, I'm very possessive about my workers. I don't just don't let anybody talk to *my* workers." But I would always let Jean talk to my workers. And we had worked together with different workers. We had come, like, on the Walk of the Cross on Good Friday, and had been a speaker at one of the stations, and oh, other times I had worked with Anna with different workers.

And the other thing that she said was, "You know, Jean comes from this from oh, a kind of religious. We come from it because we care about workers and this is what we're

doing, so I guess *we're* doing God's work." [Both laugh] So, it was such an interesting kind of bringing those worlds together and articulating it in a sort of humorous way. But, anyway, it was very nice for me to hear that.

And then there was Josh, who talked about early on when he'd come to work, he was – we were set to practice role-plays on talking to a worker on these issues, and Josh said, "Oh, I was just doing awful," and Jean finally said, "So, what *is* important about this work?" And then, when he talked [to us?], "Well, that's what you say!" And I think Casey had a story, something like that, when we had – we were going to talk to a community worker in Hood River, and she was very nervous and not knowing what, and again it was sort of saying, So Casey, "Do you believe in this work? Then what is it you believe? And *that's* what you talk about!"

So, it was very reaffirming and very thrilling to me to see these wonderful people, that I had had some influence and something that would stay with them in terms of really being formative in how they continued to do their work and that it was that basis of the integrity of what they believed in and the relational aspect with people.

CM: Yes, and compared with other places where you had worked for many years, like the A.F.L.-C.I.O., your time at S.E.I.U. 49 was only five years? Something like that?

EILERS: Had been [Inaudible] yeah, six years probably.

CM: Comparatively short, with a lot of influence.

EILERS: Yeah, which I think is – some of it is the immediacy of the kind of campaign work that we did, and the – and I only worked part-time. Most of the time I was working part-time, which is relative. [Laughs]

CM: I'm remembering a story of many years earlier that you'd told, I think, in our introductory session about – it was actually a story that your daughter told having just been

to her Grant High School reunion and she encountered someone who – a fellow student, who remembered you. And, in fact, I'm not sure that that student even have remembered your daughter. He remembered you! And I forget just what it was, you had tutored in with something like that. You did do some tutoring at Sabin.

EILERS: I had done, I would – went down and I can't remember the different programs that they had, but helped out in the classroom on Tuesdays.

CM: Always a teacher, a lifetime of being in service to others.

EILERS: Well, again, I think that was – goes back to that whole connection in the convent, and that whole – when Vatican II came down, it just – to have faith make sense and make – you know, it just grounded in the – Jesus was a person who cared about the poor and wanted – those were the values and so how do we do that today in real life and real time and not get up and – irrelevant sorts of stuff. And that's how you live! You know, when you can live like that, it's really – it's just so energizing. It's like the conversation with a hairdresser over Occupy Portland that energizes. I mean, I had so much energy that day just because of that conversation.

CM: I was thinking of asking you today, while there's so much lamenting of the deplorable state of the labor movement, some of which you described in these sessions, what do you see, if anything, cause for optimism, but I think you've just described some of it.

EILERS: Right, Carolyn. Yeah, you just hope, it's like, you're right. Seeing this whole Occupy Portland, seeing the unions understand their issue isn't different than our issue, it's the 99% and we are a piece of getting out of, or making the change, and if we don't get out of it, if we continue to decline it's going to be even smaller than 99% or bigger than 99%." [Laughs]

CM: Yes, 99.9.

EILERS: Right, exactly. So, I don't know. It is hard to see. You know, S.E.I.U. has been great. It's really a union who just knows organizing's so important; it's why even taking on the Providence campaign, which the odds were not easy when you look at the size and who they are and in a state that isn't organized in the healthcare industry in big numbers. And then with security guards and janitors and just taking on those things, it's energizing and it's great to see.

But sometimes – and they do incredibly hard work. You look at Local 49 and it's small and yet never seems to shirk away from a kind of big battle that needs to be taken on and takes it on. And I don't know. I haven't been in the inner parts of other unions, and even S.E.I.U., to have that split in California doesn't help life go forward. You lose when you're in those sorts of battles for a long time, and sometimes I think S.E.I.U. gets just so focused on itself instead of being part of the whole. So, these are things that give me hope. [Laughs] Give me hope is, I guess, really this movement right now is the spark of hope. And, it's like Madison. When they overreach, the politicians in Wisconsin, the governor of Wisconsin and Ohio and those places, and we saw pushback and people who weren't necessarily union supporters I think came to understand "Oh, this is an important part of our society if we're going to be a democratic society, if we're going to have any kind of more equal distribution of the wealth." So, I guess those things give me hope and how we take advantage of it. I have not felt like I needed to be down at Occupy Portland. They were doing a fine job. And, we went down one day to support, so, anyway, it'll be interesting, and I am hopeful.

CM: Let's take a short break.

EILERS: Yes.

[Tape stops]

CM: We might say something about your husband Bob's career and the fact that he's retired, too?

EILERS: Bob – after he left the priesthood got his degree in marriage and child and family therapy, and then, that's when we first moved up here – he got his degree from Cal State Dominguez Hills when we were living in California. And then we moved back up here to the Portland-Vancouver area, and he first worked at Catholic Family Services, and then was in private practice with a group for a while and then ended up partly because of his connection with the Jesuits. They actually invited him to be at Loyola Retreat House, and he was in private practice then. And retired a few years ago, probably maybe three or four years ago from that role. He often gets called into it. He still sees a couple of people. Somebody will call up and say, "Would you mind seeing so-and-so?" And in other ways – he has a friend, a person in the parish who was probably one of the most active people in the parish that you can imagine, and then got sick, has diabetes, can't really walk, is having back pads [pains?]. Anyways, confined to a wheelchair pretty much, and it's very hard. And his wife really sees – when Bob just goes to visit him as a friend, that it is totally therapeutic for the other person. So he has these gifts and these skills that are called upon just in life, I would say. But the other thing he does is he takes classes at Portland State, which when you're over 65 you can do for free; you can audit them for free. But audit is not a good word for what Bob does to these classes.

CM: He takes them seriously.

EILERS: He takes them seriously, he writes the papers, he reads all the books, he feels totally obligated to do every piece of it and be the star student, I think. I give him a bad time about it, but I think the professors appreciate the seriousness 'cause not every college kid does, even though these are probably upper-division classes.

CM: Do you know what some of the classes were?

EILERS: Right now he's taking feminism and social justice.

CM: No kidding.

EILERS: He took – when he started he took a lot of history of the Middle East, part 1 and part 2, so he could really understand today. He took a class on socialism and war (I think) or sociology of war, something like that. Yes, he's done a lot of – he did take one film class, which is maybe a lighter nature, not particularly, given the way he approaches it. [Both laugh] So, he keeps busy that way. He keeps saying, "Next quarter I'm going to take an appreciation class, appreciation of music or appreciation of art, something like that."

CM: Something light! When you mentioned the film class, that reminds me of someone else who I see a lot at Jobs With Justice committee meetings and events is Brooke Jacobson. She has been involved in film for a long time...

EILERS: Oh, really!

CM: In Portland. Was one of the founders (I think)of the Northwest Film Study Center. It's called something different now, and is president of the part-time faculty at Portland State.

EILERS: Oh, no kidding! I didn't know that! They're in – well, I don't know about the part-time, but the regular professors, Bob was saying they actually had a demonstration today in support of their bargaining.

CM: Oh, my goodness, it's just everywhere, isn't it?

EILERS: Yeah, yeah, yeah. It's such a crazy world but we can't see.

CM: So, you and Bob, as retired people, are busier – as busy as you've ever been probably [Both laugh].

EILERS: Well, it seems like that. We keep up, but your schedule is very different, and you just have a different rhythm to what you have to do...

CM: and perhaps you're more personally in control of what you do; you pick and choose.

EILERS: Right, right, in many ways. And Michela, we spend a fair amount of time trying – going, picking her up and lending her the car, and, little things that she needs to do.

CM: And she works in Hillsboro, right?

EILERS: She works in Hillsboro; she lives on the Westside in Portland. She's teaching eighth grade [Inaudible].

CM: Eighth grade?

EILERS: Eighth grade, language arts.

CM: In what school?

EILERS: Poynter Middle School in Hillsboro. And it's a good place; she likes being there, she...

CM: Another teacher in the family.

EILERS: Yes.

[End of Tape 10, Side 2]

Tape 11, Side 1
2011 November 30

CM: Continuation of Jean Eilers' oral history. This is November 30, 2011. We're in Carolyn's house, Carolyn Matthews, interviewer. And it's a beautiful fall day.

Jean, let's start with you reading this statement. Include the date that you wrote that, also. That describes you so well.

EILERS: This reflection was given as a member of a panel on organizing, as part of a symposium at Mount Angel Seminary, that Father Bob Krueger, Father Chuck Lienert, Father Jack Mosbrucker had organized and had invited real people to come and sort of fill in the parts of Catholic social teaching. This was in either 2009 or 2010 (I'm just a little fuzzy on it).

"My name is Jean Eilers. I'm an organizer for S.E.I.U. Local 49 and a member of St. Andrews Parish. I'm a second-generation Portlander. My grandfather immigrated from Ireland around 1886 and drove a horse-drawn cart delivering meat. He was the head of the local Ancient Order of Hibernians, a mediating institution which enabled the Irish to assimilate in the culture, and withstand the prejudice against the Irish. He eventually owned his own meat market. The last one was on 19th and West Burnside. Today, there's a MacDonald's on the location and my grandfather must turn over in his grave at every hamburger that is sold.

"We were members of the Madeleine Parish, and I attended the school. My father was buried from the old church, upstairs above the school, when I was 10. And my mother was buried from the new church, the present one, when I was 14. I went to high school at Holy Child, today the Southeast Asian Vicariate. And after one year at Seattle University, I entered the Sisters of the Holy Child in 1959. In the early 1960s, the Second Vatican Council took place under Pope John XXIII. And the convent was a wonderful place for deep reflection and discussion on the documents from that council. The dynamic of finding God in our world, and the preferential option for the poor, were ideas that I feel most formed who I am today.

“In the late 1960s and early 1970s I was teaching school in southern California, and with other sisters, felt we should personally get to know about César Chávez and the Farm Worker Movement. After taking the first step, greater involvement followed and in 1967 along with three other sisters I went to work with the National Farm Worker Ministry, and was assigned as an organizer in the grape and citrus industries in California. I thought I was going to save the farmworkers, and discovered they were quite capable of saving themselves. But I could work *with* them, and together we could establish a more level playing field against the big agribusiness. With farmworkers themselves working with the communities of people across the country (and even into Canada) through a very successful grape boycott, workers gained power to negotiate union contracts by which they had a process to enforce standards of pay, clean drinking water, and toilets in the field.

“I would never be the same after working with the United Farm Workers. I saw that organizing was really the tool needed to bring about change in unjust systems in our society. In 1981 I left the convent, married, and began working as a union organizer with workers of the University of California system. Again, it rang true to me: if janitors, food service workers or aides in the hospital, as well as clerical workers were going to have any say about the work conditions, they needed to be able to join with coworkers in a meaningful way to present their perspective. Eventually, my husband, daughter and I moved back home to the Northwest. 1986, to Portland. I went to work for S.E.I.U., same union I currently work with. S.E.I.U. was going through a culture change when I joined them. They were changing from a service model to an organizing model. In a service model, a worker calls a representative to come fix the problem. In the organizing model, the rep works with the worker to broaden the concern – unfair treatment, low wages – to one’s coworkers, and make a plan that together they can negotiate with the boss, with some real power to bring about a fair change.

“The best part of my job is seeing the change that takes place in individuals as they learn they have rights. They stand up for those rights, and they stand up for their coworkers. That’s the goal of organizing.

“The connection of my work with my church membership was brought home to me one day, when, with another young organizer, I was meeting with Father Bob to solicit his support for workers at a residential adolescent treatment center. At one point, Father Bob put his head down and said, “Unions just have to get stronger!” And in that moment, it was clear to me that this was a pastoral concern. The concern for the families who couldn’t make ends meet on the salaries they earned. Who didn’t have adequate health insurance, or any thought that they might have a pension that would cover their needs when they grew older. Father Bob understood that unions have been an incredible force in building the middle class and distributing the wealth in a fair way in our society. But, just as MacDonald’s replaced my grandfather’s meat market, so too, corporations, a global economy have devastated the balance and order in our society. And we see 42 million uninsured today. And that has real consequences and plays out in real-life stories in each of our communities.

“So, organizing is about finding our power and using it to make a difference in the lives in our own communities.”

CM: Beautifully stated.

EILERS: Well, I think it pulls it all together. It’s interesting to me, though. This is somewhat of a shortened version. The only reason I know that is because I know I talked about Dan Berrigan and Dorothy Day because I got some pushback about that!

CM: At this event?

EILERS: At the event. And that’s why...

CM: So what did you say about them?

EILERS: Basically, that to me they were real models. And it was right in this part about – in the convent and the discussions we had about Vatican II and whatnot, and then the models of Dorothy Day and Daniel Berrigan, who (in my mind) took the stands that they took because they were Catholics. And that was very grounding for me, in understanding that – people operate in different ways in terms of what motivates, but I got the picture that both those people, their experience and connection to the God they knew was why, in the case of both of them, were very much peace activists.

CM: There was a Phil Berrigan also...

EILERS: Right. Daniel Berrigan's brother.

CM: Was he...

EILERS: He had been a Josephite priest, actually, and he then left the priesthood and married Liz (wonderful woman) and they – McAllister. And they started Jonas House (I believe) in Washington, D.C., which is a peace, non-violent, intentional community. They also had several children, and I had the opportunity to meet one of them at – She was a presenter at Northwest Women's Conference. (I'm messing the name up, but it was something like that.) And it was put on by the Northwest Intercommunity Center for Peace and Justice (again, the name's a little screwed-up, probably). But they put on Women's Conference, not every year but almost – it felt like every other year, maybe. And they brought very significant speakers to this conference. And it was a huge conference, with plenary sessions as well as smaller workshops. And one of Phil Berrigan's daughters gave a smaller session. I can't remember it exactly, but then we had a chance to talk with her during lunch and whatnot. It's just nice when you have life connect in different ways.

CM: Right. And something goes on in the family like that. Was Phil Berrigan a model for you like his brother Daniel was?

EILERS: Yes! Definitely. You know, I didn't choose to list *all* of the people! [Both laugh]

CM: What was the pushback from the group?

EILERS: Oh, it was – somebody raised (I'm trying to think) the issue of the Vietnam War and sort of the criticism and unacceptance of soldiers who came back from Vietnam. It was sort of a challenge to – maybe it didn't serve all people, is what I suspect they were trying to say to me.

[This section is restricted until January 1, 2032]

CM: Well, as we kind of wind up these sessions, it might be interesting to reflect on the fact that you're a native Portlander and as you said in your statement you're a second – third generation. Your grandfather immigrated.

EILERS: Right.

CM: So your family's lived in Portland a long time. You're a native Portlander; so am I. Though we were both away from Portland at about the same time, 1960s and 1970s, and then returned. So, reflecting on some of the changes that might have been in Portland, granted it would be in the early years it was through a child's eyes, a child's experience. Portland was a smaller town.

EILERS: Right. Of course, the streetcars were a big part 'cause they went right down our street, and we put nickels on the tracks...

CM: [Laughs] To what?

EILERS: So the train would go and smooth it out! [Both laugh] And riding the trolley cars. You know, I have memories of that, and the bridges. Portland and its bridges certainly – and the times – because sometimes we would go pick my father up from Union Station when he worked there, or from – somehow, or my grandfather from his meat market or what have you. ‘Cause people only had one car in those days. They thought that was quite sufficient! And frequently, you stopped because the bridge was up, because the river was a working river.

CM: And a boat was going under the bridge, yeah!

EILERS: That’s right. So those are big memories. The old Saint Vincent Hospital up on (where was it?)...

CM: Westover?

EILERS: Westover, you’re right.

CM: Northwest.

EILERS: Northwest, that’s right. And Henry Thiele’s. There were places that were sort of memory places. Obviously, Yaws. As a teenager, the drive-in, that was – So there certainly are places that have memories. And for me, that time, growing up Catholic, you were in sort of a Catholic ghetto, ‘cause we went to Catholic schools, and those were in general the people you knew and interacted with except for your neighbors, that you knew.

CM: When you returned, let’s see, you returned in...

EILERS: In 1986.

CM: You were still a nun though, in the 1960s at some point.

EILERS: Well, there was one year I lived in Portland. In 1976 I think it was, I lived in Portland and taught at St. Rose.

CM: That was around the time that I returned to Portland, too, and I remember being impressed with the change. It may have been the Vietnam years that changed Portland from a fairly conservative town to – it seemed like we were hearing a lot more about world events in a thoughtful, critical way. ‘Course, I was older then! [Both laugh]

EILERS: It’s hard to know, which is age and which is – But there’s this history of Portland, the gangs and the mafia, the whatever. It was not anything I knew personally, particularly, but you sort of heard that rumor...

CM: Yeah. In the 1950s there was some big scandal about the Teamsters and I only vaguely remember hearing *about* it.

EILERS: Right. And I remember because – [one?] was Dave Beck, who was Seattle-related, but it was big enough that one day, I (in high school) had a job helping in some store, and it seems like a Fred Meyer-type, to take inventory on their shelves. And there was a mailbox for sale, you know, where you could put your name, so we put Dave Beck’s name on a mailbox! [Both laugh] I wasn’t asked back the next day.

CM: He certainly had name familiarity in town!

EILERS: Right.

CM: And you might not have been in town during the newspaper strike, of the *Oregonian* and the *Journal*.

EILERS: Right. I obviously heard about it later, but I suspect I wasn't here, or I was certainly out of it.

CM: No, I think you left in 1959, didn't you?

EILERS: I left in 1959 and was back that one year in 1976, and then not back until 1986.

CM: I think you just missed it. One of my high-school classmates parents was in that strike. But I didn't understand it at the time. My father was a union man at the time, and I didn't – there was not table talk about unions, generally. I regret that.

EILERS: I know, it isn't...

CM: I'd love to talk with him now about all of this stuff.

EILERS: Oh, I know. Well that's – I was going to say, the regret of sort of learning that my godfather was F. Leo Smith, and he didn't die until he was 99, I think the obituary says. So, I was back in Portland from 1986, and I so regret not having – figured – One: first remembered him and then secondly been able to make the connection and hear who he is. Because it turns out he was the lawyer for S.E.I.U. 503 back when it was [O.P.E.U.]

[End of Tape 11, Side 1]

Tape 11, Side 2
2011 November 30

EILERS: Another thing. In the obituary that I noticed is that his nephew, Dave Meyers, came to say the funeral mass. And so, that's somebody I need to look up. I know Dave Meyers. I've met Dave Meyers somewhere along the line, but, had never made that connection.

CM: What was the family connection? Was F. Leo Smith your father's friend, or...

EILERS: I think he was my father's friend because I think he may have even been my father's best man at his wedding, but he was married to – isn't it said Josephine Gleason, and that's another Catholic family name. And I've had vague remembrance of them playing bridge together with my mother and father. So, whose friends they were, I don't know.

CM: Regrets are good lessons, I think.

EILERS: Oh, I know it is! Like "seize the day!" [Both laugh] We really must.

CM: Well, I'm thinking maybe we could wind up.

EILERS: Okay.

CM: Unless there's something else that you...

EILERS: Did you want to know any more about the current Faith Labor Committee and Jobs With Justice?

CM: Sure, go ahead. Let's talk about it. We did talk quite a bit about the Faith Labor Committee last time.

EILERS: Oh, did we? Okay. I'm just forgetting. It's on to – right! So we're in the process of preparing for the next Faith Labor breakfast. It's going to be the tenth annual, and it's going to occur on February 29th. We figure nobody should have anything on their calendar on February 29th. [Both laugh] So, no excuses! And, and somehow it's going to reflect what's happening with the Occupy process because it's a movement that's just speaking to the right issues and how do we incorporate that and look at that. So, that's going on and we're doing that. And I did invite Susan Stoner to come to our next meeting because I think she'll – she just can contribute a lot.

CM: Oh, terrific! [Laughs] Oh, why don't you mention while we're on tape, her books? Which is...

EILERS: Yes. Carolyn, last time I was here, lent me Susan Stoner's book called *Timber Beasts*, which I began – had to hold my breath as I read through the beginning murders, but it was a page-turner. You could not put it down; you always wanted to know what's going to happen next, how they are they going to resolve this, and – Just very interesting, of course, to read about Portland and the Northwest, and to – Oh, Susan does a wonderful job of characterizing the different segments in society, and perspective on people.

[Sound of male voice – on TV or radio – in background]

CM: Oh, let that go.

[Tape stops]

EILERS: We need to find younger people; I guess that's the plea.

CM: I just wanted to mention quickly that Susan Stoner is a labor attorney for Amalgamated Transit Union 757 in town, which represents TriMet workers among others, and she does a lot of original research on these books about Portland, and she writes them expressly for working people, which I think is interesting.

EILERS: Right, right.

CM: Well, I might be able to attend February 29th. [Laughs]

EILERS: Good.

CM: The labor breakfast, yes, it's a wonderful institution. Yes. Well, shall we wrap up for now, then, until next time when we might have, hopefully, a little coda of your family – at your house?

EILERS: Right, right.

CM: Finishing today, then.

[Tape stops]

Okay, we started talking about MACG. Maybe explain what MACG's named for?

EILERS: MACG is Metropolitan Alliance for the Common Good. It's an Industrial Areas Foundation organization, the foundation that Saul Alinsky started, and I don't know how long it's been in Portland. I would say, maybe 12 years, something like that, but it had predecessors. There was the...

CM: Portland Organizing Project.

EILERS: There was Portland Organizing Project, and then there was the start – when Dick Harmon came and started organizing. That was really based on this Industrial Areas Foundation. There was an intentional change from Portland Organizing Project into this model. And there was a different name that I can't remember at the moment right before Metropolitan Alliance for the Common Good. So, there have been – it's an organization with churches, community groups, unions, to be members, and then really the issues are local issues that rise up out of concerns through these listening sessions and through models that have really been developed through the Industrial Areas Foundation; 'cause they're in many, many other cities across the United States.

CM: So, this is a meeting you're going to.

EILERS: I've been a part of the healthcare action team. Again, healthcare for all – everybody understands the reasons why that grew as a concern. And this group has been working around healthcare and working – and had to be a state issue, and the state of Oregon is actually trying to do things and making some changes and has passed some legislation. It was encouraging to hear that healthy kids initiative in Oregon three times faster than other – the national average of registering kids – has occurred recently kind of because of this initiative.

And as a healthcare group in MACG we all signed up to be able to sign up kids, so we participated in that. Not to the level that some other organizations did, but we certainly played a role in it and probably reached some people that other people wouldn't have reached, and in the model of – One of the institutions that's a member of MACG is Phoenix Rising Transitions,⁵⁰ which is a group that works with prisoners as they transition out of prison. And some of their members were very key. One was working at P.C.C. Cascade [Portland Community College, Cascade campus] and so, when he heard about this

⁵⁰ Phoenix Rising Transitions is a grassroots community-based organization in Gresham, Oregon, providing transitional support including education, mentoring and community building for newly released convicts, ex-convicts and their families, crime victims and the community at large.

program of signing up the healthy kids, really organized having us come to the campus at P.C.C. And I would say it was one of the most successful times in approaches that we had. So, I'm thrilled about more kids getting signed up; I'm also thrilled at who did that. Men getting out of prison, right? Were instrumental in doing that, and this is all a piece of how we make ourselves more human.

So, that's who MACG is and now with the passage – there was a passage in 2009 of the Healthcare Reform Bill for Oregon, and then in 2011 there was passage of Health Systems Transformation (I think they call it). And so, now it's really trying to get (and, you know, the devil's in the details) and so, now trying to work through what that's going to look like or having an assembly and Dr. Bruce Goldberg, who is the head of Oregon Health Authority, will be there to hear our questions, and we will be challenging in some ways to make sure that the principles that we and MACG, which are accessibility, affordability, quality and equity are – that they're figuring out how to make sure through really concrete ways that those values are going to be uppermost in the details of how this is going to be implemented. So, here we are, this funky little committee that's been meeting of old people. [Both laugh]. It'd be like a couple of young people...

CM: Lots of experience...

EILERS: So it looks like – we have in terms of signing up people, we had about 284 was the number we came up with last night. Now, there'll be some fallout out of that number, but our target was 250. So, we hope to get that, and then we also hope to appear rational, organized and well-planned. So, we know what we want to do, and it's coming together, but this is anxiety time before December 6th.

CM: So, then, later today you have a meeting at S.E.I.U.?

EILERS: Actually, I'm meeting with Alisa just to kind of catch up on what I'm doing and what they're doing and what their volunteer is doing, right. And then, actually later there's a Jobs With Justice Portland Rising meeting, so, that's what I'm doing.

CM: This is a day in the life of a retired activist. [Both laugh]

EILERS: That's right. There also is potential, but you got to draw a line somewhere, Carolyn. There's a meeting tonight for Occupy Portland – the faith group. There's also a meeting earlier if I wanted to go to for a labor group. You know how Occupy has done a wonderful job of having these different (what do they call them?) groups. There's the media groups, they have the kitchen group, they have the lawyers' group; they have all these interest groups that meet then and actually take on the agenda that is inspired by – So, the faith group is meeting both to put together its mission statement a bit and try to broaden who it is and what they're doing. So, I'm tempted, but I'm not sure I can do one more thing today.

CM: Where is that?

EILERS: It's going to be at somebody's house. It seems – I don't know – that's where they set it up.

CM: Not in a tent downtown!

EILERS: Right, not in a tent. The time I went was when the Occupy Portland group was having its spokes council, and at spokes council each of these groups is a spoke, and so the faith group was one spoke. It's a great play on words

So, I went to that and see there's clearly a good role and one that seemed important to me for the Jobs With Justice Faith Labor group to be conscious of and understand what's

going on in our own city and what does that mean and how shall we be involved? So I attended that meeting (that's how I got on the mailing list there). I called the Faith Spirit PDX.org, that's [Inaudible] how you could find 'em. [nothing exciting; couldn't find 'em?].

CM: The fact that they're meeting in someone's house actually reflects the Occupys' transition into neighborhoods now, to have neighborhood meetings. I was hearing about that on KBOO a day or two ago, moving into neighborhoods and just talking with people one-on-one and household-by-household...

EILERS: Right! Which is very interesting. I think we talked about this, Carolyn, when Hood River had its own...

CM: Yes

EILERS: Mosier. In Mosier they had an Occupy for a couple of weeks, but what they did was actually go door-to-door and talk to people. So, that's just incredible; it's a great time to be alive! Gives us some hope. Against the big banks and the big...

CM: Yes, and small businesses. I liked reading in the newspaper a few days ago, small businesses' response to Black Friday following Thanksgiving to encourage people to shop local. The shops on Mississippi have all called themselves "Occupy Mississippi!"

EILERS: Oh, is that right? Oh, that's great, that's great!

CM: With this optimism, maybe let's try concluding again.

EILERS: Yes! That's like my retirement, my doctor always says.

CM: There's always more [on another day?]

EILERS: My second retirement.

CM: Finishing up now.

[End of Tape 11, Side 2]

Tape 12, Side 1
2011 December 4

CM: The oral history of Jean Eilers continuing, but today we're with her family, husband Bob Byrne and daughter Michela, and we're at their house in Northeast Portland. And this session will probably wind up the oral history. We thought this would just be an interesting coda to have, a completion to the whole thing. So, my overriding question, having had so many wonderful sessions with Jean, what must it have been like for her family to – You're all very active and aware people. What's it like to live in an activist family? [Laughs] You're busy all the time. Demonstrations you've been to, and so forth and so on.

Michela, you started talking about your recollections of being with your dad at demonstrations.

MB: Yes, I have these really early memories of being – of taking a bus down to Salem, and we'd be at the capitol and I don't know exactly the protests were about, but I remember sitting on my dad's shoulders and I'd get a balloon and we'd see all the different people that my mom was friends with and worked with then. I think one of the biggest things both my parents did was have a lot of activists and people, like-minded people around them and over for dinner, and because I was an only child I think I spent a lot of time listening to those sort of conversations, so I think even as much the influence of my parents, just the fact of who was around was as much of an influence. But my memories are definitely positive of being able to have that time with my dad and also understanding that there was something bigger going on that my mom was involved in and that he was certainly proud of and that I should be proud of, too.

CM: Do you remember any specific people, either adults who had an impression on you that were part of this...

MB: I think early on, the people that my mom worked with at O.P.E.U. , certainly her secretary Jimmy kind of took an interest in me, made my Halloween costumes and just –

it was like – he was very in tune to – he was the best gift-giver. Very in tune to me. And then her friend Rich was always very good about taking me to the zoo and OMSI [Oregon Museum of Science and Industry] and so – I mean, those were like kid-like things that we got to do together, but I think it also gave me positive relationships with people who would go on to do really important work and were influential.

CM: How about you, Bob? What do you remember?

BB: Well, I don't remember it as being jarring, it just seemed to fit. She and I have talked and even with Michela, though our styles are different, our values are the same, in that justice is important. So, this kind of activity, it was pretty natural. And part of that is my own personal background where I grew up and my own schooling and especially in theology, coming in touch with having time to study about liberation theology and connect it with social justice, so it wasn't difficult. I think sometimes – I remember one demonstration I was still wearing a collar...

EILERS: That was before you were married.

BB: Yeah, before we were married. And I remember it was a little bit awkward, because on the opposite side at some point (I can't remember, it was in California) – there was another priest on the opposite side of the situation. [Laughs]

CM: Do you remember the issue?

BB: Well, it was – the Farm Workers.

MB: Another Jesuit? Or just another priest?

BB: I don't think so. No, 'cause the Jesuits were pretty much in favor of the Farm Workers, but this was a parish priest probably representing the growers, that's my guess. I didn't go over and chat with him!

CM: I think Jean did mention, didn't you, that the growers in Delano, or one of those big towns, there was the Catholic church for the growers and the Catholic churches for the farmworkers, so...

BB: So I remember that, yeah.

CM: You said your growing-up years had an influence on this too. Did you come from a family that was concerned about social justice?

BB: Well, I think so, but they wouldn't articulate it quite like that. But...

MB: Your uncle?

BB: Well, that's true, my uncle, who is a Jesuit priest [Father Cornelius Byrne, S.J.]. He certainly – he worked among the Native Americans, and was their ally in that he wanted to make sure that their culture was preserved and not, you know, destroyed by the onslaught, so. And even in high school I remember probably a most informative class had to deal with the teachings of the Church about labor and how strong the reaction by some of my best friends were. You know, "what?" They couldn't believe it. You know, where we grew up was a fairly well-to-do area in the city.

CM: In Spokane.

BB: In Spokane. So, some of my best friends then were – and one of them still is – very Republican, whereas the other, he and I have been friends for so long, and he remembers

having to tell his dad, “You know, Dad, I can’t believe what your Republican Party stands for anymore.” So, you know, disengaged from that. [Laughs]

MB: But, then, your dad, too, certainly maybe more so in his action than his words cared about equity and about treating people with dignity.

BB: Which triggers the memory, because we frequently on New Year’s Day or New Year’s Eve, we’d go to the City Club, which was a pretty fancy club. That’s the only place that you would have ever seen Black people. They were the waiters and the meat carvers, and what was interesting – and I was kind of mesmerized – but my dad knew these people, and he would get up from the table and he would go over and start talkin’ with them at the carving station. But they didn’t have any freedom to come and kibitz with us, but he had the freedom to be able to do that. And I think in a way he kind of delighted in doing it and just kind of – he just did.

EILERS: And he also brought home just all kinds of people to your house for dinner.

BB: Right. You never knew exactly who was going to be at the dinner table. Sometimes homeless people...

MB: One-eyed Johnnie?

BB: One-eyed Johnnie, who Dad claims had a lot of money; he didn’t look like it. [EILERS, MB, & CM laugh] God, he looked as disheveled as a – like a rag picker. But you never knew. But everyone was pretty welcome. But that didn’t just mean my dad. Brothers and sisters could bring home people, too, unannounced. Or with little announcement, and people enjoyed company because of that.

CM: Your uncle was a Jesuit priest. Was the Jesuit influence in your family too? I mean apart from your uncle; your parents – did you go...

BB: Went to a Jesuit high school, right. Was never attracted to the diocesan priesthood. And actually I was more attracted to the Jesuit scholastics initially, because they were younger and you just could identify. I knew at some point that I was going to have to pay attention to that, and I did, while I was in a hospital.

MB: Discerning

CM: You were in the hospital?

BB: Well, I had just finished two years of college, and I had to have some surgery, so while recouping, and I said, “I’ve got to make a decision one way or the other. Am I going to go back for my junior year, or am I going to get this bug – this churning that I need to resolve and do it now.”

MB: To join.

BB: Yeah, to join [the Jesuits]. So, that’s what I did. And I joined late in August, and entered in September of the same year. So I went through the process, anyway.

CM: I’m sure you’ve been asked this question many times. When did you start to know that you would be departing the priesthood and starting in a different direction?

BB: Well, that’s a good question; it’s a fair question. I was in a job assigned to be what is called “Director of the School” in Tacoma, and it’s an administrative job. You’re in charge –though there’s a president who runs the school, but you’re still in charge of the school, but you’re in charge of the community, too.

MB: The Jesuit community?

BB: There were some kind of rogue people that demanded a lot of time, one of whom, though, was – he was our fundraiser, and he was a delightful guy, but he was spendin' money more than he was bringin' in [Laughs] and he led a lifestyle that was – he'd have a new BMW. Because he would raise money, but then when you do that, the moneyed people – you know, you got to have some boundaries!

MB: They [take care?], yeah.

BB: You have to have some boundaries. So, anyway, I reached a point so I said, “Three years. Do I want to renew this for three years?” I said to the prov[incial], “I don't want to this.” And he said, “Well, but you're doing such a terrific job. You're doing such a terrific job.” And I said, “Well, I don't want to do it! I've had interest in doing some other things.” So with great reluctance (well, at least it seems, looking back), they said, “Okay.” So, I first – then, people said, “Well, why are you doing this?” But the more people that kept asking me that, the more uncomfortable I got because it felt as though I had to give them an answer. So, I needed to get into a location where I could just kind of hang out. So, I ended up going to the California Province and was helping give retreats and that type of thing. I was down near Santa Barbara at a place called (very ritzy!) Montecito.

In the meantime, she and I had – but we hadn't talked with each other for about three years, and I didn't want to complicate stuff, this friendship, now. I needed to kind of take time. So that's what I did. When I got there, rather than having people say, “Well, what are you going to do, what's your next assignment?” They just said, “God, it's nice to see ya. How long can you stay?” [Laughs] So, I was there for about a six-month period and then over time working with a spiritual director, and so on, then I had time to sort out some stuff, so that's what happened. She [Jean], in the meantime, had sent a letter to me. I received it, and I just left it on the desk, and I didn't touch it.

CM: Unread?

BB: Unread, I didn't read it. I wouldn't open it for at least six weeks, maybe two months. Just sat there. And then at some point I opened it up, found out she was just down the street virtually, in Oxnard! [Laughs]

CM: Have you heard this story before?

MB: [Yes].

CM: So your friendship continued?

BB: Yeah. And my leaving was – I have a brother who's still a Jesuit. It was very painful for him. Terrific support was my own mother, which was great! And fortunately I don't have any animosity and still have some very good friends who are Jesuits. I mean, we're close!

CM: And your faith is still important to you?

BB: It is, it gets challenged a lot. You know, you talk about good ones, not so good. I thought the most painful one in terms of my own faith, especially in terms of the professed statements of Providence, after a while it just *drove me crazy!*

CM: Providence Hospital.

BB: Yeah! A Catholic hospital! I have often had dreams of decertifying Providence as a Catholic institution. In part, because they're just a big corporation under the guise of – in my view.

CM: You used the phrase “liberation theology” a little bit ago. Is that a particularly Jesuit phrase?

BB: Well, no, not necessarily. It came out of South America and Central America. Actually, it’s kind of – it’s Biblical based in that it comes out of the Exodus experience, the oppression of the people. So, it comes out of that from the ground up.

MB: It’s sort of the idea that – I was able to – I went to a Jesuit college, Holy Cross in Worcester and was able to take a...

CM: Worcester, Mass?

MB: Yeah. And so I was able to take a course in liberation theology⁵¹ with – my professor was a former Jesuit who had worked with Gustavo Gutierrez, who is sort of the “godfather” of liberation theology...

CM: What was his name?

MB: Gustavo Gutierrez. He’s Peruvian. I think he’s still alive. But the thing that really resonated with me was the idea that for so long, the Church had told the poor that “Your gift will be in Heaven. You are blessed in that later you will receive this special treatment.” But that nothing was being done to help their plight on Earth.

BB: That’s true.

MB: And that that was not in line with any of the rest of the Christian message.

CM: Michela, you’ve been raised by Catholic parents who both have a strong Catholic background. Has that continued in your own – does the faith continue with you?

⁵¹ Liberation theology is a Christian theological approach emphasizing the liberation of the oppressed.

MB: Yeah! And I think part of that was a pivotal decision of where to go to college. And I think the fact that I went to Holy Cross, which was really far from home and sort of like establish my own community and became involved in the chaplain's office and retreats and Pax Christi⁵² when I was there. I wonder, had I chosen to go to a different college, if my faith path would have been different. I think I still would have – I certainly still have the same roots, and I certainly chose to go to Holy Cross because my dad had been a Jesuit and my uncle is a Jesuit and I was [working through interests?] and exploring. And the parish I grew up in had a lot of Jesuit volunteers, and former Jesuit volunteers, which is a volunteer program that – it has the name of the Jesuits; it's actually separate. But they...

BB: The one out here?

MB: Yeah. Both a domestic program and an international program, and so I ended up volunteering with their international program...

CM: What is the name of the parish?

MB: St. Andrews, here in Portland.

CM: Yes, of course!

EILERS: And that was right after college. You...

MB: That was right after college, right. And that was definitely solidifying. I think in part being sent to a Catholic country and seeing...

⁵² Pax Christi International is an international Catholic peace movement. It was established in France in 1945, and spread to other European countries and the U.S.A. It was recognized as "the official international Catholic peace movement" by Pope Pius XII in 1952.

EILERS: Peru.

MB: Yeah, I was sent to Peru and working with the Jesuits there and working in a Jesuit school.

CM: Was that in connection with the college, or it came later?

MB: It was after college.

CM: What did you do there?

MB: I taught school. I was in an elementary and secondary school. I taught English. There were five of us that were volunteering, and four of us were in one school, and one was in another Jesuit school, but we all taught English.

CM: To whom?

EILERS: Grade school kids and high school kids.

CM: So, did you major in education?

EILERS: No, I majored in English, and I didn't think that I wanted to be a teacher, but J.V.I. [Jesuit International Volunteers] mostly – at least in our programs abroad, they (for the most part) you are sent into a teaching position because that's the one skill that you can offer .right out of college; like most of us don't have enough experience in social work or other kinds of work to be able to offer that.

EILERS: [You wouldn't want to displace a job of another person?] [Inaudible]

MB: Right, and you have to fit in with whatever the culture already has in place, and a lot of these countries don't have social workers or other kind of equivalent work.

CM: So you taught English.

MB: Taught English, which was actually a great jumping-off point in order to make connections within the community. And especially in the school we were in. We lived – the five of us volunteers lived in a house that was part of a community that was built by Habitat for Humanity and then the school Miguel Pro had been built just down the street, basically in conjunction with Habitat. And so part of our job as teachers was to make twice-a-year visits to our students' families, the students that we had in homeroom, and because we lived in the same community as the families and went to the same parishes as the families, we were very much wrapped up in their lives and their struggles and they were wrapped up in our struggles and it was a really good way for us to be a part of that community.

CM: Was that for a year, or...?

MB: It was two years. It is that.

CM: Oh, my goodness! Like the Peace Corps or something...

MB: It is, yeah! In that way it is.

CM: What a wonderful experience! And your parents visited you during your...

BB: We did, [Inaudible].

EILERS: And we had the best guide!

BB: That's right. [EILERS, MB, & CM laugh]

CM: Were you able to take some time away and travel around a little?

MB: Yeah, we had a few weeks.

EILERS: It was the school year, it was during their summer.

MB: And part of the summer their school did a month-long service trip with the high school students, and then, right when we got back from that we had about a month, all of February off, pretty much. And so we were able to travel for a lot of that, which was good!

EILERS: And then, when she came back we actually got to see her teaching in the school, beginning the year [Inaudible].

BB: Yeah, we did.

CM: So your mother, who has had lots of years of teaching – were you nervous, having her watch you teaching?

EILERS: [Laughs] It was a totally different teaching experience. I don't think of either of you really as teachers. I mean, you certainly helped me and taught me, but that wasn't – I guess it was formative in some ways that it wasn't your true calling and so.

CM: You were a teacher, also? I know you were in social work.

BB: Well, as a Jesuit I taught here at Jesuit High School as a scholastic before ordination, and then I taught in their seminary, which is [the building] where Jean went to high school and Michela later at daycare. [Laughs]

MB: Preschool

CM: Which is the Southeast Asian Vicariate...

MB: Right. At [Northeast] 54th and Sandy.

CM: When did that end, as being a Jesuit?

BB: Let me see. I was there from 1974 through 1977, and it was still a few years after that. Then, they moved over to the convent at St. Ignatius Parish. So I'm not sure. I'd say in the 1980s sometime.

CM: The reason I ask – it's a silly connection really, but when my husband and I first moved to that neighborhood and we lived just very close to it, easy walking distance to that beautiful building...

BB: Yeah, it is!

CM: We moved in 1978, and sometime in 1978 or 1979, during our walks in the neighborhood we noticed that there was a big kind of garage/yard sale at this place and we went in there and we bought a broom which we still use!

BB: Oh, is that right?

CM: So I was wondering if maybe that's when. They were clearing out. That would have been in late 1978 or 1979.

BB: Yeah, it could have been. I know that a good friend that I worked with there, he then was the novice master, so I don't know how long it was there because then I had gone to Tacoma, was assigned to Tacoma.

CM: And you got a degree in counseling? Marriage and family and child counseling, in California.

BB: In California, right.

CM: Which you've been practicing ever since.

BB: Right. For the most part I retired; I just see a couple people.

CM: Well Jean, this is your oral history. Do you have reaction to what you [heard them saying?] [Inaudible]

BB: What you heard, yeah! This is...

EILERS: No. I think, you know, I think it's interesting. Finding – when I was looking through things I found all these Mother's Day cards and the series of books that Michela wrote. She'd make little books, "My Mother and I." Books, each year there seemed to be one. But what's interesting, and there's very much a reflection that comes out of my either not being able to be at home during certain periods of time, or being busy or working late at night. She would write me notes about – she was having trouble with some homework question or issue and would write a note about it and so then in the morning we would talk about it. And very aware, certainly, of the whole sense of workers having a voice. And so, definitely picked up on all the issues.

MB: And I think you did a really good job of – there were different periods in my life when you worked more and then periods when you worked less, and I think that those critical stages, when you purposely took time when I was in middle school to be home, and worked part time...

BB: In middle school you say?

MB: Yeah, when she was working in Vancouver from 1992-[1998?]. And then even when I was in high school, once you had taken the job with the A.F.L.-C.I.O., there were a few examples of her not being able to be at these – like, I had a homecoming dance and she couldn't be there to take my picture, but she had stayed up all night making my homecoming dress. So, it wasn't like there was a lack of presence, or she'd be in an airport and would write a really thoughtful letter. And she definitely spent time thinking about me and being present in the ways that she could – but I think we talked about it later, as – because I was an only child, I think there was always a danger of being doted on too much or having too much attention, and I think it was healthy to have her involved with something that was bigger, so that it wasn't like “Yes, maybe I am the center of *your* universe but I'm not the center of *the* universe.” And that's a healthy thing to know.

BB: Good distinction. [Laughs]

CM: I'm curious. As a teacher, are you in a union?

MB: I am in the Hillsboro Education Association, which I guess is part of the National Education Association? Yeah. It's an interesting time to be in, especially in education. I think my personality in some ways is more – I was attracted to teaching because I loved teaching when I was in Peru, and I wanted my work to be devoted to helping people. But I also – I do not like things that are controversial, and I thought I was entering a really benign profession and suddenly it was not a benign profession anymore I don't think. So

it's an interesting time. And even people that I really respect and I think are excellent teachers are anti-union. It's interesting, kind of like having to be defensive...

BB: Because you're on the faculty?

MB: Yeah. And I think people who have good intentions and do get frustrated and by wanting what – wanting every child to be educated in the best possible way, but I think sometimes can be so overzealous that they forget that if you don't take care of teachers, then kids aren't going to be well taken-care of either!

CM: So you have a contract that's active now?

MB: Yeah, finally! I think Hillsboro took a really long time to – they were out of compliance for a while. I can't remember the whole controversy, but they finally got one last year. (Or *we* finally got one, last year, I guess.)

CM: Any other comments? Are there any other people? You often talk about Ruth Shy; what influenced you?

MB: Yeah, I think both of you had people who you were friends with and who were and who were influential on your life and who were part of – I remember being part of the conversation around the dinner table. And I think the fact that I was an only child; there wasn't a kid's table and there wasn't a place to – I wanted to be part of this conversation, and I wanted to listen. Ruth Shy, certainly, and Ken and people you worked with in the union, but I also think Joe Small [a Jesuit friend of Jean Eilers' father]...

EILERS/BB: Was a Jesuit, yeah...

MB: David Rothrock, and Ann and Catherine, and Peter...

BB: Uncle Peter...

MB: Uncle Peter, yeah, I think that on both sides, I was exposed to people who were working towards justice, were really inspirational and articulate and engaged in these kinds of conversations.

CM: And you hosted visitors from Honduras? Is that right?

EILERS: We did recently. They were – the United Students Against Sweatshops. Jobs With Jobs had a workers' rights board, and when the Hondurans came for that, and then, there was a follow-up visit, and actually it was on the follow-up visit that – one was from the Dominican Republic and the other from Honduras. They stayed with us.

BB: Honduras, right. There were two women, right? Yeah.

EILERS: Right. And then, the United Students Against Sweatshops college students were with them. We're just post-college students now.

CM: This is probably after you left...

MB: That was after I left, yeah. I think I remember more of their friends being the ones who were here. It was really fun for me when I got to Holy Cross, and people were really excited that my mom had worked with César Chávez. I remember my friend Colleen being so amazed by that. So it was nice that people had heard of him, at least.

EILERS: And then the story in your class – I think it was a sociology class professor asked if anyone had a parent who was in the – or a mother who worked in a...

MB: Male-dominated. Yeah. I think that did, somehow, come up.

EILERS: And you were a brand-new freshman. This is the way you told the story, anyway. You were a brand-new freshman. "My mother" and raised your hand...

[End of Tape 12, Side 1]

Tape 12, Side 2
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MB: Remember that and that was always like “Right. How much of this story do I want to reveal to people before they – ‘cause I always want people to know me before I told that story so that they wouldn’t snap to any judgments. But actually what I found at Holy Cross was that people were much more accepting and tolerant of that because there was – almost everybody was Catholic. And so, there was a sense of you could be whatever kind of Catholic you wanted to be, whether that was a conservative or progressive or in the middle or whatever. Whereas I think here in Portland it was like nobody’s religious, so if you’re at all religious, then you’re lumped into one category.

CM: And is that experience in high school, or was that your experience coming back to living in Portland?

MB: Well, yeah. I think my friends from high school were very ecumenical and very tolerant because we had been friends forever, since we were little. And so it wasn’t like they were going to be judgmental, suddenly. But right, I think it is more, since I’ve come back.

BB: [Yes].

CM: At some point the child begins to understand that her parents had a life before she was born. [Family laughs] What must have come to you; you’re so articulate about it now. Do you remember when this started to be an awareness for you? As a very young child, you probably – well, this is the way it is!

MB: Yeah, I don’t know. I don’t really remember ever sitting down and having this conversation about you having been a priest and a nun and having that be shocking. It must have just permeated...

EILERS: Well, there is the time when you asked us, since we had an irregular marriage in terms of the Church, did that make you an irregular?

BB: An irregular. [All laugh]

MB: But I do remember at some point being in a soccer tournament, and somebody that was new on our team – somewhere, it was like Helen and I were sitting on the sidelines talking and she wanted me to tell this new person that you had been a priest and a nun and so, it did come up at certain times. It was sort of like exotic thing; Helen was very accepting, but I don't remember why that would have come up before that, why people would have known that about you guys other than, maybe we as kids talked about everything. I don't know.

EILERS: Michela is close to her cousins, and they had this sort of great interest in the Byrne family history. So, that piece...

MB: Well, and I always loved stories, and family stories, and there's so many great family stories, especially from my dad's side of the family. Because they're a big family and they're very gregarious, and when they all get together they're funny, the way they tell their stories. And my mom has some amazing stories too, but her family is much smaller now.

BB: Michela is very close to her cousins that are close to her in age, especially the twins and Nick...

MB: Yeah, and they all went to Catholic grade schools, high school, and they're not Catholic at all anymore. But I think they'd gone to such a – I don't know. I think they were really turned off by the Church in some ways because they went to such a by-the-books kind of schools. I don't know.

EILERS: We deliberately felt it was good for Michela to be in the public school. That she probably would do okay in any school, and would be an asset.

BB: She would do well in any school, not okay! [Several people laugh]

EILERS: So it was a deliberate choice to be part of the public school system, was a value we had. And it certainly did serve her well.

BB: Which seems, even now at Saint Andrews to kind of – it confuses some people, because they know that Michela did go through the public schools, whereas they most often, a lot of families send their kids to Catholic schools.

MB: Well, we're lucky to live in a city that had good public schools, too! I felt like I got a good education.

BB: Oh, yeah! Great!

CM: Just for the record, name the schools that you went to.

BB: I went to Sabin Elementary, which is right down the hill, and I went to Beaumont Middle School, and then I went to Grant High School. I had some really good teachers.

CM: You just had your 10th year high school reunion.

MB: I did. Reunion.

CM: And you saw some old friends? At least one, who remembered your mom, I understand. [I heard that story?]

MB: Yeah! It was really fun to see the kids I'd gone to grade school with. I have friends from high school that I'm still in touch with, but very few from grade school, so that was a treat.

BB: There's a young man that works down at the New Seasons down here on 33rd and I went in there and went up to the meat department, and he said, "You're Michela's dad, aren't you?" And I hadn't seen him, oh for...

MB: Since probably Sabin.

BB: Since Sabin, yeah, right!

MB: But he was real good about volunteering in the schools, too.

BB: Nice young guy, really is!

CM: We do a lot of shopping there.

BB: [We] don't do too much, some though. Some of their products are very good. It's a little more expensive, though.

CM: That reminds me. Should we talk about – you mentioned the C.S.A. [Community Supported Agriculture] that you're involved in. Have you belonged to the C.S.A.?

MB: I have. Actually, the family that runs it, Lynn Jacobs, the mom, is a family practice doctor who works at Virginia Garcia,⁵³ which is where I worked on and off all my summers

⁵³ Virginia Garcia Memorial Health Center, established in 1975 is a non-profit organization that provides primary health care in Washington and Yamhill counties in Oregon.

in high school and in college and then actually after I got back from Peru I worked as a case manager there. And so Lynn (I've known Lynn for a long time) and her husband, who runs the C.S.A. is also equally impressive. [Juvencio is from Honduras].

BB: He is, isn't he?

EILERS: And her kids go to this...

MB: Oh that's right. Her kids go to Pointer, where I teach. And then she has one more daughter, who I think is in elementary school, and she'll be going to Pointer (maybe next year or the year after?)

CM: For the record we should say the C.S.A., Community Supported Agriculture. And what's the name of the farm?

MB: La Finquita del Buho.

CM: And translate it.

MB: The little farm of the owl.

CM: Now, your involvement in it, does it come from her?

EILERS: Well, a little bit from her, but more with Ann Turner, Doctor Ann Turner and Catherine Bax, both at one time worked at Virginia Garcia. Ann is the medical director, and is still there. So through them, we share a share in the C.S.A.. But then we went out there to help with the harvest a couple of times, which was delightful to meet Juvencio, who went to...

CM: Did you know that Juvencio was a student of my husband's. Some time ago.

MB: Oh! I didn't know that! Oh! That's really nice! Oh, what a nice connection! He's so wonderful, yeah!

CM: So, I've been out there once, probably. My husband Bruce has been out there as well. But they're a delightful family. The children were very little at the time.

MB: Oh were they? Nice!

BB: I don't think I've ever seen their kids.

MB: The two boys are in high school now, and their daughter (I think) is still in elementary school.

CM: It's a wonderful concept, C.S.A.

EILERS: Yes, and certainly we have come to love kale. We would not have, you know – part of it was just introducing yourself, and then you got to scratch your head and find a recipe and it turns out Lo and Behold! It's good!

CM: And good for you!

BB: A lot of good dishes you could make out of it.

EILERS: There's another connection, while we're just sitting here. It's the picture that is up there on the wall, the homeless man?

CM: Behind the tree?

BB: Yes, aha.

EILERS: It's a picture painted by Debra Beers. She was an artist here in Portland. I met her when she was struggling as an artist, and so working at Powells Bookstore for the first time that Powells tried to organize, when I was working with Oregon Public Employees Union. For my last birthday, Michela made all the arrangements in connections with Debra Beers to get the painting!

CM: It's very nice. Nice with the tree in the front.

BB: This is a memento of our trip to Peru, when we visited Michela.

CM: Oh, beautiful!

EILERS: It's the kind of boats, the reed boats that float – that they use and build along with the reed floating islands that they have in Lake Titicaca, outside of Puno.

MB: So the whole island flips, and they just – when the bottom deteriorates, they just add more layers of the reeds on the top.

EILERS: And they live on it!

BB: They live on the island, yeah.

MB: And they go to school, pretty amazing.

CM: Well, what do you think? Are we [Inaudible] don't have to...

BB: Did we do okay? Did you...

EILERS: Did you pass? [Laughs]

BB: Did we pass? [Laughs]

EILERS: [Inaudible] student.

BB: Yeah, right!

MB: It was good. I think – it's interesting. We were reminiscing a little bit about [like things?] and then the products that I didn't grow up with? Like I never ate grapes because they were always on strike? And you didn't have any Nestle products...

BB: Yeah. That's true.

EILERS: That's right. And I just realized that I never talked about being on the board of Infact,⁵⁴ which was a result of – we mentioned Ruth Shy. Ruth Shy is someone I worked with the Farm Workers. And then Ruth left – when she left the Farm Workers, she helped to organize with this organization called Infact. They were the Nestle boycott originally, and then they evolved into a boycott of G.E. [General Electric] with their whole nuclear products and all of that. And so I was on the board of that, and from Michela I'd get memories of being on the phone forever.

⁵⁴ Infact was begun in 1977 to lead a boycott of Nestlé after it ran a marketing campaign for infant formula that contributed to the deaths of children. Involved in numerous campaigns against corporate abuse, it is now known as Corporate Accountability International.

MB: Yeah, it was like back in the days when there were still those phones that had the long curly wires, and so she would sit in another room and it would be hours and I would want her to pay attention to me!

CM: [Laughs] The phone took the long curly wires like mine! [Everyone laughs] The one that I [sleeve?]

BB: And those meetings which take you back East!

EILERS: And sometimes I would go back East for these [meetings].

MB: My dad and I took a lot of trips where my mom would have some kind of meeting, and we would just go, tag along.

BB: Yeah, we did do that. And on occasion, we would end up, like [Inaudible] with Pat and Mary Ann up at the lake, and you were unable to come. We would hang out together.

MB: Lucky I had both of you!

CM: Well, what do you think? Are we...

BB: Well, thank you!

CM: Well, thank *you!* This is a wonderful gift that Jean, you've been making for posterity, and both of you for contributing. And for encouraging Jean to do this. I understand you did that. Thank you very much!

BB: Yeah. There were times when she would screw up...

EILERS: This isn't video, Bob.

BB: Yeah, but she would do it to me. You would screw your face up to [what?], you know!
"No, go ahead!" I wish it were video; they helped capture some of that!

CM: For the record (we probably should have started with this), could you both – Bob, we'll start with you. With just identifying your full name and when and where you were born. That's just part of the documentation.

BB: My name is Robert Byrne, and I was born in Spokane, Washington on April 30th, 1940.

MB: And my name is Michela Byrne, and I don't have a middle name on my birth certificate 'cause it was left off, but I've taken my mom's last name as my middle name, Eilers. And I was born on March 10th, 1983 in Huntington Hospital in Pasadena, California.

EILERS: It's probably South Pasadena, California, isn't it?

BB: The hospital? No, it's Pasadena.

CM: March what?

MB: March 10th^h.

CM: All right, folks. Let's finish up. Thank you very, very much.

EILERS: Thank you, Carolyn

BB: Thanks, Carolyn.

[End of Tape 12, Side 2]
[End of Interview]