

Where We Come From Who We Are



Service Workers Oral History Project
Service Employees International Union, AFL-CIO, CLC
Local 82

February 1997

This book is a product of the Service Workers Oral History Project. Oral testimonies have been edited. Complete audiotapes are available at the District of Columbia Public Library, Washingtoniana Collection.

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| Published by: | SEIU, Local 82 |
| | 1213 K Street, N.W. |
| | Washington, D.C. 20005 |

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| Partially funded by: | Insignia |
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HUMANITIES COUNCIL
of Washington, DC

Elizabeth Kennedy

Interviewed by Myrna Mobley: August 1995

Elizabeth Kennedy played an instrumental role in organizing the members of 1199 who worked as janitors and custodial staff in other unions. With many international union headquarters located in Washington, D.C., this sector of the union is larger than might initially be apparent. Mrs. Kennedy continued her activism throughout her career in Local 82 and served on a number of member committees. She also was a participant in this oral history project and helped to interview other members of the union.



MYRNA MOBLEY

Elizabeth Kennedy

I came into Local 82 about a month after I had been working for the National Association of Letter Carriers, and that was in 1952. It was very nice. There was only one job open at the building...that was the elevator operator. [I was] running the elevator, bringing in furniture, and helping set it up there in that building. I enjoyed everybody. They were very nice. At that time, there was only four offices that began to open up, and it was a very small company. It grew, and I met a lot of people. I enjoyed it.

[There were no problems with being promoted or making progress] because it seems as though our boss, the main manager, wanted to see that we were very much taken care of for sick benefits and having other benefits.... By them being union, they didn't want to have anyone there that was not in a union because that made it better for their situation. So they brought us all in as union, and they sat down, and they talked to us. They appointed me to be the organizer and the shop stewardess at the same time.

We organized with the Letter Carriers that wanted to join the union. They pointed us to Local 82 which Mr. Bailey was the one that had to be called in. He came down and explained all about the union, what our dues would be, and what we could do and what we couldn't do, and the problems we would have. He and I got along very good.

We wanted to join the union at Local 82. We couldn't come under the Mail Carriers because we were not mail carriers. We

Joining the Union

Organizing

were working in the building and they wanted to give us the same benefits that they had. So we had to come under another union.

[I also organized]...the people that worked at night [at the Teamsters] and the cleaners for the daytime.... We got that building organized.... Then we went right back and got the Carpenters Union into it too because they didn't have a union. So we were going in the neighborhood down in C Street and D Street. We went from building to building, Mr. Bailey and I, and we started to organize the different unions. That built up Local 82 in that area. [It was] just the two of us and Mrs. Neal.... [The members] had to sign the cards with Mr. Bailey. We went to them, and we had meetings with them. Then they signed their cards and signed up to be into the union. They could get better benefits.

[It felt great to be an organizer back then] because you didn't have any problems like you have now. Everybody was all excited because there wasn't anybody bringing the union to them at that time.... We stepped right in with no problem. They were glad to get in because they could see the benefits that they could claim later.

[Today] people think that the union wants to take the money and not do anything for them. They do not know what the union is set up about, what it's for, what benefits they're gonna gain. They don't seem to understand, so they don't want to have that money taken away from them. The first thing they're gonna say is, "I don't think the union can do anything for me," not realizing that the union plays a very big part...because they do gain benefits.

*The Benefits of
Being in a Union*

I would say join; stick together; understand it; go to your meetings. Know what it's all about. Then you wouldn't have to ask anyone any questions about it because you would hear it at first hand. So you don't have to go out and say, "Oh, what happened at the meeting? What carried on? What was done?" No, you don't have to say that. You've been there. You know what it's all about, ...and what is being done with your money, and what benefits you're going to gain.

I worked for 40 years at the National Association of Letter Carriers, and the benefits showed me that it was worthwhile working there for that union and being in Local 82. I've gained a lot of things.

I got promoted from the elevator operator to working at night like a shop stewardess—showing them how to clean the office. From that I went into the kitchen, and I started fixing food. I became the

cook. I became the manager and the cook because there was a small kitchen which we [used to feed people] in the daytime. It was a small lunch. It wasn't a large lunch. As they grew, I came in to be the head of the whole department, and I went from there to be the chief cook. When I retired, I was the head of all of it because I was the management. So that's when I retired.

In the Letter Carriers, we started out with about 40 people. We went from 40 to when I retired, I was caring for over a hundred people a day. I worked for Senators and Congressman, and people from out of town...when they were having meetings at night. I was doing work like cooking, serving dinner, lunch, and breakfast when I left. There were four [people working under me], and then it went from four to five cause I needed that many people to help me serve. I had five under me. They all were under Local 82.

The others [the janitors] were under Thomas. He was the manager at night. I don't know exactly how many people were working for him because they were there at night, and I was day time manager.

[Monthly dues] started off a \$1.00 a month and then it went from there. I think it was \$12.00 now, isn't it?. It went up each year because the more people that came in, the [more expensive it got to run the] union.