

# **Voices of Feminism Oral History Project**

Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College  
Northampton, MA

## **KAREN NUSSBAUM**

interviewed by

**KATHLEEN BANKS NUTTER**

December 18–19, 2003

Washington, D.C.

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with generous support from the Ford Foundation.

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## Narrator

Karen Nussbaum was born in Chicago April 25, 1950, the daughter of Annette Brenner Nussbaum, who “did public relations for educational institutions and organizations for the public good for many years,” and Mike (Myron) Nussbaum, an exterminator (1946–70) and actor and director (1967–present). She attended the University Chicago for a year and a half and became involved in the anti-Vietnam War movement. She moved to Boston, working for the antiwar movement there while supporting herself as a clerical worker at Harvard University. She earned a B.A. from Goddard College in 1975.

In 1973 Nussbaum and some friends organized 9to5, an organization for women clerical workers, initially in Boston. By 1975, Boston 9to5 had joined other similar groups across the country and they reached out to a mostly unreceptive labor movement. SEIU, however, welcomed them and Local 925 was born. In 1981 the union expanded to a national jurisdiction and became SEIU District 925. Nussbaum was president of the 925 union and executive director of 9to5 until 1993. In 1993 President Bill Clinton appointed her as director of the Women’s Bureau of the U.S. Department of Labor. In 1996 she went to the AFL-CIO to head up the newly created Working Women’s Department, which was phased out in 2001. Since then, Nussbaum has served as Assistant to the President of the AFL-CIO, John Sweeney, and as director of Working America, community affiliate of the AFL-CIO. She lives in Washington, D.C., with her husband and their three children, who range in age from 15 to 20.

## Interviewer

Kathleen Banks Nutter was for many years a reference archivist at the Sophia Smith Collection. She is currently adjunct faculty at the Fashion Institute of Technology in New York City. She is the author of *‘The Necessity of Organization’: Mary Kenney O’Sullivan and Trade Unionism for Women, 1892–1912* (Garland, 1999).

## Abstract

The oral history focuses on the various phases of Nussbaum’s life but is especially strong on her role as a co-founder of 9to5 and her work on behalf of working women, both as a government official and within the trade union movement.

## Restrictions

**Closed until January 1, 2006.**

## Format

Interview recorded on miniDV using Sony Digital Camcorder DSR-PDX10. Four 60-minute tapes.

## Transcript

Transcribed by Luann Jette. Audited for accuracy and edited for clarity by Kathleen Banks Nutter. Reviewed and approved by Karen Nussbaum.

## Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

### Video Recording

**Bibliography:** Nussbaum, Karen. Interview by Kathleen Banks Nutter. Video recording, December 18–19, 2003. Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection.

**Footnote:** Karen Nussbaum, interview by Kathleen Banks Nutter, video recording, December 18, 2003, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, tape 3.

### Transcript

**Bibliography:** Nussbaum, Karen. Interview by Kathleen Banks Nutter. Transcript of video recording, December 18–19, 2003. Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection. **Footnote:** Karen Nussbaum, interview by Kathleen Banks Nutter, transcript of video recording, December 18, 2003, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, pp. 22–24.

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Transcript of interview conducted DECEMBER 18 & 19, 2003, with:

KAREN NUSSBAUM

in: Washington, D.C.

by: KATHLEEN BANKS NUTTER

**BANKS NUTTER:** This is Kathleen Banks Nutter in Washington, D.C., talking with Karen Nussbaum on December 18, 2003. And I really thank you, because I know this is a busy time of year and a busy life that you're taking time out of. So I do appreciate your willingness to chat with us. The purpose of this, as I said, is to try to get at the impact of the women's movement on the women's labor movement, but we do like to get a sense of the person and so that's why we do like to start with some background information and your childhood, because none of what we do is in a vacuum. So I hope, if you don't mind, if we can spend a little time talking about that. Starting with your parents. Their values, their politics, their position on race when you were growing up in Chicago in a pretty volatile time. So, if you'll just tell me a little bit about them?

**NUSSBAUM:** Sure. My grandparents all immigrated from parts of Eastern Europe and ended up in Chicago ultimately, and so my parents were first generation and grew up in this kind of immigrant Jewish milieu, progressive — well, we didn't call it progressive in those days — a liberal kind of outlook and then raised the three of us in a suburb in the kind of prototypical Jewish liberal suburban upbringing in the 1950s and the 1960s. And I always considered myself very lucky because I was 18 in 1968, so I was coming of age when the whole world was blowing apart and the notion that social justice was something that you should fight for and it was not just an obligation but, you know, a glory, and it could give meaning to our lives, as well as place us in our world, and so it was great. Now, you know, getting up to 1968 was all of the trauma of what does life mean and the suburban hypocrisy and all that kind of stuff. But I felt I was very much a product of my times.

**BANKS NUTTER:** Now when you say that liberal Jewish cultural milieu, what did that look like? You know, for a 10-year-old, what did that mean? Did they take you to meetings? Were there particular readings in the house?

NUSSBAUM: Well, there were a few things. One is, my parents were always very interested in culture. My father was an amateur actor at the time and had always wanted to be a stage actor and he is, now. Soon after we all got to be 20, he quit his business and he became a full-time actor and director, so that was part of the home life and they and their friends held play reading groups where, you know, twenty of their friends would come over once a month and they would read a play like *JB* [by Archibald MacLeish] or something. Something light [laughs]. And then my father later became part of the Theater of the Absurd scene in Chicago. He worked at Hull House when it [the theater] was really just beginning and very exciting, and as a 14- and 15-year-old, I'd go with him to Hull House and watch him in rehearsals. And he'd be doing Pirandello and [Samuel] Beckett and these kinds of plays where I would be sitting in the audience just sobbing. You know, it may be absurd but it just seemed tragic to me. You know, I could never see what was funny in any of it. [laughs]

BANKS NUTTER: Right. The humor comes later.

NUSSBAUM: Right. And reading was a high value in my family. In fact, when I was a third grader, my parents decided that we needed to write book reports during vacations and so, we would write these book reports and but that makes it sound a lot more formal and uptight. It wasn't formal and uptight at all. It was very kind of loose. We would sit and watch television all night together and it wasn't anything that was kind of removed from the popular culture in that way. There was a high consciousness about the civil rights movement, and while my parents would talk about their point of view or their values and all of these things, it came to me and my brother and my sister to demand how come they weren't doing more and then, to expect of ourselves that it wasn't just enough to be sensitive to problems but actually to take responsibility to solve them.

My mother was interested in books, in theater, and so on, but was also a political activist in the Democratic Party in a largely Republican county, and so she would take me walking precincts as a little girl and she would be a poll watcher during the local elections and I would see her at my local school when she was being a poll watcher, that kind of thing. I couldn't understand what the importance of that was, but I now understand that a lot of my friends, their mothers made them walk precincts, too.

BANKS NUTTER: So there was a connection. Just a little clarity — was this a Chicago neighborhood, was it technically part of Chicago?

NUSSBAUM: No, was born in Chicago and then when I was 5, we moved to a suburb. We moved to Highland Park. By the time of the war in Vietnam, my

parents were very active so, for example, there was a weekly vigil in front of the public library on Saturdays and so the whole family would go to the weekly vigil in front of the public library on Saturdays. You know, a peace vigil, and we'd go to the peace vigil and then we'd all go to the Jewel Supermarket to get the week's food.

My mother was very active in trying to bring speakers to the community about the war, to talk about what was wrong with the war. And there was a big to-do when she invited Staughton Lynd, who had been indicted for traveling to Vietnam because it was against the law so his passport had been revoked and so on, and he was living in Chicago at the time and she invited him to speak and she got some hall — I can't remember where she had originally arranged to have it but then they refused to let her have it and so she marshaled her forces and there were letters to the community newspaper and mobilizing people to fight back and finally, we ended up in the recreation center and the place was packed with people, standing room only, and so she was a real activist along those lines.

And during that time, we were getting hate mail from the Minutemen, which was the local John Birch Society and, you know, postcards with cross hairs on them addressed to my mother. So, it wasn't without some sense that it wasn't risk free for her to do that. My mother died just this last year and she had been sick for many, many years and you forget the young woman, you remember just those awful years when she was so sick. But we went through some of her papers when we were helping to write the obituary and we saw that she had been quoted in the newspaper when she was working for Gene McCarthy. She was the coordinator for Gene McCarthy for Democrats of South Lake County and she'd been quoted as saying, "You know, it's time that women cared as much about peace as they do the PTA." I thought, "Whoa, that's something I would've said."

**BANKS NUTTER:** [laughs]. Yeah, well, the inspiration. Now, this activism on your mom's part. You were a teenager at this point? I'm just wondering, how did that feel for you as a teenager? I mean, beyond the threatening mail is one piece but her activism and her being out in the community?

**NUSSBAUM:** It felt irrelevant. Just as my actions feel irrelevant to my children. Much more important to me was what was happening among my peers and what was happening in the world. I felt my parents were not nearly up to the task and, you know, that was really not what was happening. Of course, now I look back and I see how important that was in shaping our sense — the sense of myself and my siblings — about what we should expect of ourselves. And also, probably more important to us at the time was a sense that we were secure in going as far as we wanted to go or that we weren't in conflict with our parents over politics. We were, because we were much more left than my parents were, and did things

that frightened them or they didn't approve of, but they never felt like they had to distance themselves from us as a result, and I think that was really important to us.

**BANKS NUTTER:** It happened to so many families in that time. My understanding of the race relations in any major city, but especially Chicago, was pretty volatile. Do you remember any conversations with your parents around, not only civil rights but race relations? Where you grew up, was it a biracial neighborhood?

**NUSSBAUM:** No. It was primarily white where we grew up, and in fact, that was still a time when there were divisions along religion. There were the Catholics and the Protestants and the Jews in my community and it seems ancient now, but those were actually big divisions. There weren't very many African Americans where I grew up. But, of course, we were right outside Chicago and it was when Martin Luther King came to desegregate housing and the March on Washington was 1963, and all of that was really part of everywhere. You know, it was really part of the northern experience. And it was something that we talked about all the time, that was considered a tragedy but my parents felt that it wasn't within their ability to do anything except sympathize. And my brother, who is older than I am, wanted to go to Mississippi on the Mississippi Freedom Summer and my parents refused to let him. And when I got to be in high school, I started going into Chicago on weekends with another kid who was a political activist and we didn't do anything useful but we tried to find a group that we could be part of that was about race and was led by blacks and we were trying to experiment with what you could do about it. But the civil rights movement was extremely important in the way we saw everything.

**BANKS NUTTER:** Now you said, and I remember that, too, as a child living in Brooklyn, the religious divisions between the Catholics and the Jews, in my neighborhood was, everybody knew. So, growing up in that post-World War II era as a Jew, do you feel that shaped your identity? I mean, you said it was more cultural but, I mean, as a religion and as an identity?

**NUSSBAUM:** Well, my parents are not religious. None of our family is, so being a Jew was always completely secular to us. It was who we were and, like so many American Jews, we lost lots of members of our family in the Holocaust. Not that we knew them. And so for us kids, this was an experience of our parents, my father fought in the war, my mother worked as a young woman through the whole war and, you know, they vowed they would never buy German goods and so that was the sense that you could never just live your life isolated. It wasn't your life alone but your life was inexorably tied to the society in which you lived and therefore you had to be a participant and you had to be vigilant and you

had to take responsibility. That very much, I think, grew out of their experience as Jews during the war.

BANKS NUTTER: You talked about going into Chicago on the weekends in high school. Tell me, high school in the mid-60s, especially in a place just outside of Chicago must have been, I don't know, exciting or politically charged at times. So you were active as a teenager separate from your parents?

NUSSBAUM: Yeah, right.

BANKS NUTTER: What was that political activism like for you then?

NUSSBAUM: Well, it was — you know, high school was horrible, really. Only less horrible than junior high school [laughs].

BANKS NUTTER: That's probably the worst thing in the world. That was like really horrible.

NUSSBAUM: Particularly in the 60s, it was really horrible. But, finding — you know, this tremendous conflict between, on the one hand, defining yourself as someone who wanted to fight for social justice and on the other hand, wanting the perfect Villager outfit. There was a lot of conflicting messages going on at that time. And there were very few outlets for a young middle-class girl who was trying to get politically engaged. My brother was a draft resister. He went to college and immediately got totally involved in politics. And so that seemed to me completely appealing and engaging and I couldn't wait till I could also leave home and get into college and find a way to really take root and figure out what I could do.

For example, in high school, we created the Social Action Committee. There was like ten or twelve of us who were radicals and we would invite speakers [to] the school, and it was amazing but you could get a lot of kids to come to these things; you could, because it was the 60s and there were enough — kids were interested in what was going on. We had a speaker who was a black anarchist [Jeffrey Stewart] who was active in Chicago and a poet. And we brought him to the school. And it was a big deal, you know, could you have an anarchist in the school anyway. But we finally got him and there were like a hundred kids at the thing and we had the two sponsors of the Social Action Committee — the teachers were Lou Silverstein, who was the first Jewish teacher in the high school of 1700 kids, and then Miss Price, who was older, a bit conservative. A nice woman, I didn't know her very well, but — so, the black anarchist poet read some of his poems. And one of them was about [President] Johnson shitting bombs on Vietnam and then — that was bad — but then, when he took the dictionary and ripped pages out of the dictionary because our

government was lying to us and words didn't have meaning — Ms. Price just lost it, and she ended the meeting and the Social Action Committee was disbanded and the black anarchist poet was shooed out of the building. And so there were all of these [?], and we had to go to the principal and were we going to be expelled and, there was all this tumult about free speech and politics and what was crossing the line and what was acceptable and so on.

And we were excited to engage that. By that time, there were also peace demonstrations and I'd go into Chicago to participate in all those. And you know, just finding whatever way I could to try be relevant to my world and also find a way to kind of take myself out of what to me seemed so phony about this kind of middle-class, hypocritical high school experience.

BANKS NUTTER: In your Villager outfit.

NUSSBAUM: Right.

BANKS NUTTER: So, now, there was though, some teacher support. Were there, besides your parents or other family members, other, less immediate family members, adults in this period of growing up in your teenage or high school years [who] seemed to be an inspiration or just a support for this kind of activism?

NUSSBAUM: There were a couple of teachers who were supportive, but you know, it was one of the strengths and weaknesses of the time that we weren't very interested in adults. We didn't think they had very much to teach us, and so we looked much more to the kids in college and the people who were just a few years older than us. And so, I don't actually think of somebody that helped guide me in that way.

BANKS NUTTER: You mentioned your brother a couple of times.

NUSSBAUM: Right. And in those days — also, just a few years made a huge difference. He's three years older than I and he was in college and he went to Antioch [College], which was a very progressive institution and there was a lot going on there and so he showed me that you could really get into a lot of this and that was very exciting. On the other hand, I remember, clearly, my brother was indicted for turning in his draft card and resisting the draft and my mother standing at the stove, mixing the spaghetti sauce with tears rolling down her eyes. She thought his life was over. You know, I think it's a big laugh, right? But if my kids were about to go to jail, I wouldn't think it was funny either. But at the time, we felt invincible. And partly that was the times and partly it was the atmosphere that my parents created and we felt very supported and we just didn't feel afraid of anything.

BANKS NUTTER: Now, in high school, would you say, the thrust of your high school activism was around the war and the antiwar movement?

NUSSBAUM: Yeah, around civil rights and the war.

BANKS NUTTER: And civil rights, too. What about, what we would see now as the women's movement? Was there a piece in there yet?

NUSSBAUM: You know, I remember the first women's meeting I went to, I was probably a freshman in college.

BANKS NUTTER: So that's –

NUSSBAUM: 1968.

BANKS NUTTER: In high school?

NUSSBAUM: No — well, for example, I ran for president of the student council when I was probably a junior, to be the president the senior year. And I did it because no girl had ever been president of the blessed student council. So there was a kind of incipient girl power that really didn't have much of a context. But, you know, I felt it and girls did not get our due and that was for sure.

BANKS NUTTER: During that period, when the older family member would come to visit for a holiday and they said, "What do you want to do when you grow up?" What would have been your response? Say, at 10 or 15?

NUSSBAUM: I didn't know what to do with all of this, you know, heartache about the world condition. And then, there was this television show, *East Side West Side*, with George C. Scott and Cicely Tyson about two social workers and I thought, Oh, well, I could be a social worker. That was the only option that seemed available that seemed relevant. And I remember — and so that sort of satisfied that question, well what will you be? So I was going to be a social worker. But then, I thought, well, how would you ever decide that you had worked enough? You know, an eight-hour day wouldn't be enough to solve the problems that you would encounter so how could you ever work enough? Or how could you set any limits, or how could you take limits off? Because what I was feeling was this sense that you couldn't, that it wouldn't really get to the root causes, you could solve individual people's problems, till you couldn't breathe anymore but that probably wouldn't work.

I remember now that actually the first time I felt like, Oh, you know, society is awful, there's something I need to do about it — I was watching some television show about the flag that was raised at Iwo

Jima and that there were, I believe, five soldiers who were actually part of it and one of the soldiers was an American Indian but when they retold the story, he was left out of the story, and this was not a documentary, it was the story of his life and how he, because of his race, he was a nobody and he was written out of history and he died, ultimately drowning in a shallow puddle because he was drunk. And I went to my bed and I sobbed and my mother came up to comfort me and she said, "Well, you know, you could be a social worker, there are things that you could do."

And so I kind of stayed with that for a while and then it wasn't until I got to college that I remember standing in the Commons Hall — I can't even remember what it was called at my university, and there were, like, 25 tables set up. There was the Grape Boycott and there was the YPSL, the Young People's Socialist League, and YAWF [Youth Against War and Fascism] — I can't even remember what YAWF means now, and there was the SDS and a million things. And I remember being in this hall and thinking, OK, well which one do I choose? How do you figure out what's there to do? But I was on the road to coming to what we then called a radical analysis. How do you find the root causes of the problems and that's what you work on. And it was an education. It was not the education that the University of Chicago intended me to have, but it's the education that I was looking for and I felt really satisfied that I found a path.

**BANKS NUTTER:** So you went, graduated from high school and went right into the University of Chicago and that would have been in '68?

**NUSSBAUM:** Right.

**BANKS NUTTER:** What, besides the 25 tables, did that feel like? You know, going off to college is always an exciting but, sort of scary, it's a big moment, a seismic shift in your life, but in this case — it's September or whatever in 1968, what did that feel like?

**NUSSBAUM:** I actually have been thinking about what I felt when I went to college because my own children are of college age now. But actually, I can't remember being at all afraid. I can't remember being anything other than excited about being, you know, freed from my shallow suburban existence and going to something new and, of course, the University of Chicago was a dreadful choice for me. I wasn't paying any attention. They said quite clearly in their materials and in the interview that what they value was the life of the mind and this was an ivory tower and you know, they told me. I just wasn't listening, and I thought it was going to be, you know, a radical place where I could meet a lot of people who shared my values and so on. And of course, that was true in just about any big university at that time and so, I did get what I was looking for,

but it was definitely not what the university was promoting. So I rooted around.

I got active in the draft resistance movement, and that was a weird thing for girls, because it was all about girls supporting brave boys — and they were brave, I mean, but I think it was a lot of draft resistance girls and women who then became an early part of the women's movement. What was this about? It didn't reflect our interests or who we were very much. But it was a way to be active on the war and that was very important.

And then, soon after I got there — at the Democratic [National] Convention — I actually had a job inside the convention as a gofer and so there I was in the convention, seeing what was going on outside. So I left the convention and I went out to the demonstrations late that night in front of the Pitt Congress Hotel and the air was filled with tear gas and they had stink bombs at the Pitt Congress and people were dispersed by the time I got there but they were still hanging around in clusters and just the power of the moment, you know, with the students chanting, “the whole world is watching,” and in fact, the whole world was watching, and the enormity of what was going on inside the convention, that it was responding to what was going on outside the convention. We didn't even understand it at the time, of course, but now I look back on it and it's unbelievable, the power of social movement to affect what was vigorously trying to be contained just as kind of business-as-usual politics. I had friends who were a part of the group that were training and I can't remember exactly how they did it, but you know, the techniques that they were using — Japanese demonstrations of marching together, and so these friends of mine were doing that. The whole thing was crazy, right? But it was like magnetic. It was electrifying. It was unbelievable. And so that was the context, a week later when I went away to college which was just a mile down the road.

Soon after I got there, though, there was a huge to-do. First there was a movie about seizing the building at Columbia [University], there were these gigantic SDS meetings where mostly boys would argue with boys for hours and were giving incredibly long speeches to each other and girls would stand around in circles around them and listen to them. It was really stupid. But that was what it was like in those days. And the sense that there was this exciting stuff going on in Columbia and Berkeley and then not long after that, there was a “Rehire Marlene” campaign. Marlene Dixon, who was a popular radical teacher, was being fired. I can't think of why anymore, but that became the reason that we demonstrated. So, within a couple of months, we had taken over the Administration Building and stayed — occupied the Administration Building for weeks. And the administration just waited us out. They weren't going to repeat bringing in police and clubbing us and so on [as Columbia University had]. But that was an experience that was really much of the times and you know, I was deeply involved in it.

I was in a class that was the prototypical liberal education class at the University of Chicago called Liberal Arts I. It represented half of your course load and it was a very tiny class of just 12 students where with a very highly regarded teacher — his name was James Redfield — and we call called each other Miss Nussbaum and Mr. Moon and Miss Cassedy and we couldn't call each other by our first names. And so, even within the class, we would start — and we had little name tags that said, Miss Nussbaum and Mr. Moon and Miss Cassedy and so we crossed out those names and we put our first names. We couldn't help ourselves. We were just so antiauthoritarian, we needed to express ourselves in every part of it that we didn't like. So it was an education.

**BANKS NUTTER:** So, beyond the antiwar movement, as you pointed out earlier with the 25 tables, there was this just seemingly incredible plethora of causes. Was there anything else while you were at college still that you were drawn to?

**NUSSBAUM:** Well, I was part of the Black Panther Support Committee. Black Panthers were being jailed, killed, wiped out all over the country and in fact, Fred Hampton was killed in his sleep in Chicago near where I was, I think probably the next fall — I think it was the fall of '69. And I remember — actually I'm in a picture in *Time* magazine in a demonstration in front of the Federal Building in Chicago demonstrating against this — you know, the impunity with which they attacked Black Panthers. There's the trial of the Chicago Eight originally, and then the Chicago Seven when they wouldn't let Bobby Seale represent himself in court. So I was active on those, active in the antiwar movement, active in student politics in my own university. And then, it was probably the next fall that the opportunity came up to join the Venceremos Brigade and go to Cuba, and it was actually something that was tied into the Black Panthers who were helping to lead these educational sessions for people who were going. So I signed up. I quit school and decided to go to Cuba in the winter of '70.

**BANKS NUTTER:** Did you have parental support on that one?

**NUSSBAUM:** That was another weird thing, I'm sure I must have told, if not asked my parents, and if they objected, I didn't pay any attention. You know, it didn't cost very much money. I had what money it cost. It cost like a couple of hundred of dollars or something. You just had to pay your fare on what was a converted cattle hauler that took us from Nova Scotia down to Cuba. We took a bus up to Nova Scotia and then we took a ship down to Cuba. I later found out that my mother told my grandmother that I was on a study tour in Mexico or something like that. I never considered what any of this meant for my parents. It was so selfish, but that's how kids are. So my mother made up some story and then, at one

point, my grandmother suspected that something was wrong but what she suspected was that I had been sent away because I was pregnant. [laughs] So, that was fine. My mother kind of thought that might be a better fear for my grandmother to have until, towards the end of the Brigade, there was a big story in the newspaper which carried the names of all 700 of us, in the newspaper, and so my grandmother saw from the *Chicago Sun Times* that I was actually in Cuba and so she flipped out. But my parents protected us from that.

One funny story is that my next-door neighbor was a ham radio operator, the next-door neighbor of my parents, and so we were in Cuba for a couple of months, it really wasn't all that long, but about half-way through, on the loudspeaker, I was beckoned, I was called from our tent to go to the main office and, it's because I've received a message from short-wave radio and the message is, "I love you. Mom." So, I thought, on the one hand, oh, that's nice. But it was also kind of so typical of my mother that I didn't really think it was incredibly unusual. And what was funny was that my mother told me later that she went back in a few days or a week later to have our neighbor contact the guy in Cuba again but the channels were totally shut down because I think the Cubans thought, okay, this is kind of secret message or what was going on.

So when we returned, it was right when there was a gigantic demonstration in New Haven, to free Bobby [Seale] and Erica [Huggins], who were in jail in New Haven, as Black Panthers. We had taken the boat back up to Nova Scotia and we were taking a bus back down — I was supposed to go to Chicago but I guess a couple of us just got off the bus in Maine and hitchhiked down to New Haven to be part of the demonstrations there. And I called my parents to tell them I was back in the States and my mother said, "Karen, you must come home." And I said, "Mom, I'll come home in a couple of days. The demonstrations will be over and I'll see you then." And she said, "Just tell me this. Are there guns there?" And in fact, there were guns. There were — all of the businesses had been boarded up. There were National Guard on the tops of all the roofs with guns aimed at the demonstrators and they were out in full force. So I said, "Oh, yeah, Mom, but nothing's going to happen to me." And she said, "I've got to see you once before you die." So, I hitchhiked to the airport and I got on a plane and I visited with my parents for 24 hours and then I went back out to New Haven and then I actually went to the demonstrations for that weekend and then that was also the weekend of Kent State.

I mean, it was unbelievable what life was like then, you know, the world was blowing up and we felt desperate to stop the killing, stop the injustice. And something remarkable like that was happening almost every weekend.

**BANKS NUTTER:** And as a 20-year-old, to be in the midst of that can be overwhelming. I'm just curious, to go back to your time in Cuba, what exactly were you doing there? What is the Brigade?

**NUSSBAUM:** There was an effort called the Venceremos Brigade. They were in solidarity with the Cuban people and people would go to work at the sugarcane harvests. Sugar was the main product of Cuba and because of the blockade it was very difficult for the Cubans to actually thrive economically. And so as a way to demonstrate solidarity with Cubans and against the US policy, primarily young people went down to work for a couple of months, actually cutting sugarcane. And so, that's what we did. Now, our brigade was the second brigade and I think it was the largest, I think, that ever went. It was about 700 people and it was riddled with agents. But it was also filled with people just like myself. In fact, one of my best friends today, turns out, was on the brigade when I was. We didn't know each other then. She was living in Philadelphia at the time but, it's funny to see those ties back in your life. It's like a skipping stone. And so that's what we did. We both harvested, worked in the sugar cane fields and then there was a two-week period at the end where we got to travel around the country and see other parts of the country and meet with different local leaders and understand the country better.

**BANKS NUTTER:** And what was that experience like for you? I mean, was it a part of the progression? This was part of the politics of the time to make that statement to volunteer to do this labor, but at the time, was it anything more than that?

**NUSSBAUM:** Well, at the time, it just seemed great. Well, this is very exciting. It's a lot better than going to class at the University of Chicago, that was clear. And so I was delighted to have this opportunity and it was very exciting. Now it was a real hothouse, though. There were all kinds of political activists. There were a lot of Weathermen who were in the Brigade, who were the left split off from the SDS and a huge array of young leftists who were there and so we talked politics all the time. And politics got played out there. There were racial problems in the brigade. There were huge problems between men and women. There was this just beginning to grow women's movement, and if you can believe it, there was this huge debate about whether women should wear bras while we were cutting cane. But that was the insanity of the time, too.

**BANKS NUTTER:** And what was the debate?

**NUSSBAUM:** Well, because feminists thought brassieres were bad in those times and you shouldn't be wearing brassieres because they were yokes and all. But it was not part of the Cuban culture for women not to wear

brassieres. And so, this debate about feminism versus cultural integrity and what you do with that and so, you just ended up spending hours and hours and hours discussing the inside and the outside of every last thing.

But it was like a crash course in radical politics and so for me, it was a great experience, and somehow, remarkably, I came out of it with actually a very practical politics. For many people, they came out of with either extreme politics or paralysis. And it was a terrible shame, really, but that was true for what was happening in the antiwar movement in general. By the early 70s, by 1972, really, there was this climax of the huge antiwar demonstration here in Washington with a million people and 12,000 people being arrested and being penned in outdoor stadiums and so on. And I remember the meeting right after that where you could feel identity politics emerging, unity around fighting the war dissipating, the whole thing falling apart.

But somehow, my experience coming out of the Venceremos Brigade and what was a very heavy political atmosphere was to both be sophisticated, I felt, about politics, political nuance, and analysis without trying to overstate it — please excuse me, I don't mean to be an asshole but on the other hand, feeling that what was the most important thing was to be practical in your application in order to make change.

**BANKS NUTTER:** So, your trip to Cuba, was it just one of those, OK, I'm done at Chicago, at the University, I'm done. I'm going on this. I'll figure out what I'm doing next summer when I get back, or did you — did you have a more conscious plan?

**NUSSBAUM:** No. I have never cared what was coming next. I have never planned for anything. And that's worked out great for me.

**BANKS NUTTER:** So you went — and what I'm hearing you say is that it helped you, that experience helped you solidify somehow, a more practical application of your politics?

**NUSSBAUM:** Well, I just learned a lot. I learned about revolution in Cuba.

**BANKS NUTTER:** What was Cuba like in 1970?

**NUSSBAUM:** It was thrilling, you know. It was a society that was combating racism, that had provided free health and educational care to every person in society, that had reduced income inequality more dramatically than any place else on earth, that had created literacy in an illiterate country by having middle schoolers going out and teaching adults. It was very, very exciting. So, that was terrific — and to understand what struggle was like. You know, what it meant to fight against the government in a totally different context. You couldn't take the experience in Cuba and apply it to our circumstances. I never thought that was the point. But

why do you take a class in college? Well, it's to analyze a subject, to understand it, take it apart in order to put it back together again. And that's what this was like. It certainly made me feel that a commitment to trying to change things was not only good to do, but it was also possible. You could change things.

**BANKS NUTTER:** So, you come back and it's Kent State. At that point, were you thinking you'd be going back to school or what?

**NUSSBAUM:** Well, so I moved back to Chicago and I worked on, you know, the huge student movement outcry at that time, which took me through the summer probably, through June. And then I took a drive-away: that was this thing that kids did in those days. Someone who had a car wanted to fly across the country but they wanted their car there when they got there. So kids like me could drive their car. So I got a drive-away and I went from Chicago to Boston just because I thought there'd be a lot I could do in Boston. I didn't know anybody. I didn't have any plans. I didn't have any money. But I did have a drive-away, so I went to Boston and I somehow hooked up with some people who let me stay in their place and then I found these other people who had also been in Cuba, I think, and I knew them vaguely.

But, so there were four women who all lived together. And that's when we also started doing work as women. Political work as women. And there's this huge culture of young people getting jobs to support their political work. And that's what we all did. One of our roommates worked in a warehouse and I worked in a food co-op and sometimes I worked passing out leaflets, commercial leaflets in downtown areas, promoting one thing or another. I can't remember what. After I was there for about a year, I got a job as a clerical worker at Harvard University, as a clerk typist. But what we were really doing there was having a — how can I even say these things? We had something called “female revolutionary education” where we provided courses for other women who wanted to learn stuff. And we taught auto mechanics and we taught political theory, and we taught emergency medicine and people would come to these classes.

**BANKS NUTTER:** Now, where would they be?

**NUSSBAUM:** In our living room. And we were just one little tiny thing. We did silkscreen posters that we would then go out and put on walls at night, and there were hundreds of little groups like us all over the place. That was what was so amazing. It was happening everywhere and we weren't like particularly the biggest or the best or the most interesting thing. We were just one of a million things like this, that if you wanted to do something, you got another couple of people together and then you did something and twenty people came to it. There was a woman who —

I'm kind of blanking on her name right now [Jayne West] — but who started the whole karate movement among women in Boston, and just put an ad in the weekly progressive newspaper —

BANKS NUTTER: The *Phoenix* [Boston alternative newspaper]?

NUSSBAUM: Yeah, it was in the *Phoenix*. And, so, you know, me and all my friends took karate, and on the karate nights, I would walk around with a brick in my tote bag, because in karate, we all had to have a brick that was wrapped with rope because you had to pound your fist as part of the karate exercise into the brick in order to build up your knuckles. Well, you know, so all day long you'd walk around with your brick. It was just nuts. But it was great. We were creating our own culture and it was all surrounding us and it was really very exciting.

BANKS NUTTER: Now, did the group have a name?

NUSSBAUM: That's what I was saying. It was called "Female Revolution Education."

BANKS NUTTER: So that was what it was?

NUSSBAUM: Yeah, but the karate thing was somebody else's thing and I went to that and then we had a whole separate group that did these amazing cartoons, antiwar cartoons, in the style of "Little Lulu." And we told whole stories about what was wrong with the war in Vietnam on red paper and yellow paper and then we would print them. We would mimeograph them, and then we would stand on street corners and hand them out. And like I say, I was just one of thousands and thousands of people who were doing this.

BANKS NUTTER: Was it a conscious movement away from your antiwar activism into the women's movement?

NUSSBAUM: No, we were combining it — and actually this is a theme that carries on throughout my life. I became very interested in the major issues of the day but directing it to women. You know, for example, my antiwar work, at least in part was directed to women. And this actually came out of my experience in Cuba. Because I saw there these women who were really very strong in a lot of ways, who then, to me were pitiable in relation to men — I remember one woman who was one of the leaders of our group and smart and together. But then she had this crush on this guy and it was just, like, was pathetic. Or you know, one woman who I thought of, operated in this very small women's community and she was older than I was and she was experienced, you could tell that, but she didn't take a leadership role. She was really kind of small. And then, we were in New Haven at these gigantic teach-ins around Bobby and Erica

and like 5,000 people in a room, and she got up and she chaired the meeting and she was masterful and I thought to myself, What makes her unable to do what she's able to do? What holds women back from being strong in their public life and their private life at the same time? So many people you could see strength in their private lives and paralysis in the public or the other way around. And it was in Cuba that I came to this epiphany and I felt like that's what I wanted to do, to address that problem. And I didn't think about how or where but that became very important to me.

END TAPE 1

## TAPE 2

BANKS NUTTER: Okay. So, you've moved to Boston and it, sounds like a pretty heady time in that way, and as you said, combining this movement more into what the women's movement, but sort of the more radical end of it? I mean, were you aware of NOW?

NUSSBAUM: I wasn't interested in NOW. It really didn't speak to me and my friends. We were much more part of a more radical movement. I was still very engaged in the war and I was all the way up through 1975. I was on the staff of a local organization called the People's Coalition for Peace and Justice, so I worked part-time there while I worked part-time as a clerk-typist. And, what I did there, I now think of this as being very canny, although completely unconscious, I decided I would teach high schoolers. I would help high schoolers create local organizations that were against the war. And I was like, 20, but I was still a lot older, and I had a car that I could borrow, so I was older than these high schoolers and so we created this whole high school coalition, out in the suburbs and Malden and Leominster and you know, all over the place. And we had these great kids that we worked with, and it gave me the opportunity to figure out how to organize, because it was a safe environment. These were people who were younger than I was, and so I jumped in. I was always very eager to learn how to do what I wanted to do and I remember apprenticing with older organizers, the guy was a couple of years older than me, and I was interested in all parts of it. I wanted to learn how you raised money, so I went to the guy — actually Sidney Peck, who was one of the leaders of the antiwar movement in Boston at the time — and I asked him, "I want to learn how to raise money." And so, I'd go with him on his fundraising meetings and I wanted to learn how to call meetings and run them and all that kind of stuff.

I had a moment in Boston when — in those days, most of us girls had long hair — I had to make my first speech at some antiwar meeting, and I was really nervous, and this guy was telling me what I should say. And I was looking for help, and there were three points I needed to make. So I got up and I'm making my speech, and I can only remember the first two points. And then to my humiliation, I, in the meeting ask him what the third point is. And I'm just dying for being so stupid and being — just like the worst moment in my life. And that night, I go back to our house and I have my roommate cut off all my hair. It was just this, OK, I have to fortify myself now for, you know, being even stronger and doing this even better. But there was plenty to learn. There were plenty of mistakes to make, but I still felt like, this is really what I want to learn how to do and I would just go do the work to learn how to do it.

We took a dozen of these kids in a U-Haul van down to the 1972 peace demonstration. I don't know how their parents let them come with me, just the way that my parents let me go do stuff, I suppose, to go to the 1967 Levitation at the Pentagon, which I got to do. So that was a great way to get very practical, and there were lots of girls who were involved in this high school action-activity, and there was also a huge, kind of radical women's movement at the time which at one point took over a Harvard building, which was 888 Massachusetts Avenue. I can't even remember what the building was that we took over but we occupied this building for a couple of weeks and then Mary Rowe, who was an official at Harvard, negotiated with us and after — I would actually leave during the day to go to my job, because I had to earn money but a lot of people would stay the whole time and they barricaded ourselves against the police coming in, and — I can't even remember how we ended up walking out but I think we negotiated some settlement. But there was all of that going on as well. So I was organizing high school students, I'm active with the women's movement, I'm working at my job.

Our local peace organization joined up with the Indochina Peace Campaign which was headed up by Tom Hayden and Jane Fonda. So I was on the steering committee for that organization and got to go to Vietnam with a small delegation in 1973. And again, it was one of these tremendous experiences. I was 23, and you know, I was an arrogant know-nothing. But good hearted, for sure, and it was a real learning experience. The Vietnamese, the North was not being bombed at that point, so there wasn't any danger to us. I recently have been talking with Jane Fonda again, and when she went, just a year or two before that, she was being bombed. She had to go in the air-raid shelters on the roadside. But that wasn't our experience. It was really safe, though illegal. But it meant that we could come back and talk about our experience.

BANKS NUTTER: So it was still illegal?

NUSSBAUM: Oh, yes.

BANKS NUTTER: Sort of like going to Cuba at that point?

NUSSBAUM: In 1973, we were at war.

BANKS NUTTER: Right, journalists got to travel there, though, but you didn't have official clearance?

NUSSBAUM: No.

BANKS NUTTER: So what did Grandma know at that time?

NUSSBAUM: I don't know [laughs].

BANKS NUTTER: She's gone away again.

NUSSBAUM: It was a short trip. But these were leadership development experiences, you know. I was very, very privileged to have the experiences that I did because I learned a lot from them.

BANKS NUTTER: And so, was Fonda on this trip that you went on?

NUSSBAUM: No, no. It was just seven of us who were all activists at my level, you know, kind of local leaders.

BANKS NUTTER: I did want to shift to 9to5 which we'll pick up again tomorrow, and you've already said that you were working as a clerical, supporting this activism which is antiwar, peace work, but also increasingly the radical women's movement piece there, too, and I know you've told the birth of 9to5 story a million times by now, probably, but if you could just summarize for the last few minutes we have today on that, and then we'll pick this up again tomorrow.

NUSSBAUM: I've always felt that 9to5 was born in a lot of different places in different ways, but for me, what it was, was I was working as a clerk-typist in Harvard, at Harvard in Harvard Square and at the same time, there was — the women's movement was bubbling among working-class women. There was no organizational form for working women to express themselves in the women's movement but the ideas of women's equality had infected everywhere.

So there was a woman where I worked who was reading *Sisterhood is Powerful*, a book I never actually read, but here she was, just a regular clerical worker who had no contact with anything else and she was looking for what all of this meant to her. And, at the same time, there was a strike of waitresses. Eight waitresses at Cronin's Restaurant, which is also in Harvard Square, got fed up because one of them asked for a raise or a promotion and the boss said something like, "Well, you're only women." So, here were these eight women — they were low-income, working-class waitresses and they felt like that was just too much. And as happened in the time so often, they immediately decided that what they should do is start their own union and go on strike. You know, they had no intermediate steps. The very same thing happened in Wilmar, Minnesota, just a couple of years later where, again, it was like eight or nine bank clerks. The boss insulted one of them and so they created their own union and went on strike. And, so you have these insurgencies bubbling up all over the place.

But what happened to me was I took picket duty Wednesday nights from 6 to 8. The women's community all signed up to picket in support

of the Cronin waitresses, who were on strike for a year. You know, they didn't have a prayer, they were never going to win, they had no power. But they were totally expressing what was pent up inside of working women. And so, as I walked around in circles every Wednesday night for two hours, this notion about the power of bringing together the concerns of women's equality with the institution of work began to grow within me. And that's when I realized that I could do my organizing at work. That I could bring this connection of the demand for women's equality and make those demands on bosses. And that wasn't really happening in the women's movement. The women's movement had as its targets cultural values or public services, or legal rights. But there wasn't really a demand in that way, as workers — there was demand about opportunity for better jobs, but not quite in this way, about how you would use the power of an institution on the job, to demand change for women and in which women could become more powerful. And so that was intoxicating. And we created 9to5, but there were ten of us. I just found ten friends who were all working as clerical workers.

BANKS NUTTER: At Harvard?

NUSSBAUM: No, all different places. So my best friend, actually who had a job at Harvard also, Ellen Cassedy, and then we had friends who were working other places, someone was working in a shoe factory and someone was working at a hospital [Marilyn Albert] and someone was working at an insurance company [Penny Kurland], and so we got together and we actually did something that was also very typical at the time. We met for a year. We met once a week for a year and we told each other our stories about how we got to be where we were and what we thought and what were our values and we went through this whole experience and then we talked about what kind of an organization we wanted to create. And out of that, we built 9to5, which we thought of as a women's rights organization on the job for women office workers. And we wanted it to be popular, that it should attract the people we were working with, and that it should help these women find the power within them, and attack the unilateral power of employers.

And so, in 1973, that was over the year of 1972 and 1973, in November, we held our first — oh, no, then we put out a newsletter. We put out the newsletter *9to5*. Again, for about a year, and it was during this time that we were talking with each other, but it was a very popularly based newsletter. And in fact, the very first issue, the headline in the first article in the first issue is "Every Day" and then it goes into kind of what do we confront every day on the job and then we started getting letters in from women who felt the same way we did. We would go to T stops. Or bus stops in the morning before we got to work and we would just hand out these newsletters to women on their way into the

big office buildings. And then we would start getting letters back, and then we had gotten a letter from a woman named Joyce Weston. I remember — I'll always remember, she wrote, "We'll be called girls till the day we retire without pension." You know, these completely eloquent responses.

And so then, we held a meeting that we advertised in the newspaper and finally we felt ready to launch the organization, which we did in November of 1973 at the YWCA, and we had our first meeting and 150 women came. It's unbelievable that that stuff happened: 150 women — none of them knew each other. They all just came because they heard about this and they were willing to do something so new, that they had no experience with, and they came to this meeting and the leadership that had been developed out of our own small group but then the women contacted us and from there, we built our organization.

The first thing we did was call a meeting with the Chamber of Commerce and the guy from the Chamber of Commerce met with us. Just one guy met with 25 of us or something, and we demanded a meeting with the entire Chamber of Commerce so we could talk about what we thought were the problems, and he refused to allow the meeting to take place, which was the best thing that could have happened because he said, "You have to document what the problems were."

And that's where we hit upon this technique of writing a report and then releasing the report, getting press for releasing the report and attacking, which was a series of tactics that we were able to use successfully for a decade, for 15 years, even longer, actually, but it really didn't get old. It worked really well for a long time and it was great. And there was no model for 9to5 but it was part of what, for me, had always been a tendency to just follow my nose. You know, what looks like will work next? And it meant that everything we did, at least felt to us, fresh and allowed us to combine things that other people weren't combining. And it wasn't that we were that unique, but it gave us a freshness and an excitement and an ability to do all that. You know, I was 23. You could be young and you could, like, have the nerve to just create a big organization and go out and tell the Chamber of Commerce they were wrong, and get a couple hundred women to all agree, and it was great.

BANKS NUTTER: Well, that's probably a good place to stop.

...

BANKS NUTTER: OK, this is Kathleen Banks Nutter. We're at Karen Nussbaum's house. It's December 19, 2003, continuing our conversation. Yesterday, we had just started the 9to5 piece of your life, and you were talking about the start of it and that there were, you said, around ten of you that banded

together: who were those ten? I mean, in terms of class and race and age?

NUSSBAUM: We were all white, we were around the same age, which was, I don't know, in our early twenties, and we were a mix of working class and middle class. One was my best friend from college. One was a woman from Boston who maybe had gone to a community college. I mean, there were several like that. Someone was someone that we'd met who had moved down from New York. There was just a combination. A friend of a friend but we were all working as clerical workers in one place or another.

BANKS NUTTER: I've read that several of the 9to5 organizers went to the Midwest Academy with Heather Booth.

NUSSBAUM: Right. One of us, Ellen Cassedy, my friend, went to Midwest Academy, I think the first summer that they ran a class, and our group all pitched in the money to send her, to pay her expenses and the fee for her to go for however long the session was, and so she learned some techniques and tactics for community organizing and then we applied that to the workplace situation.

BANKS NUTTER: And, could you just — for the historical record — what was the Midwest Academy?

NUSSBAUM: The Midwest Academy was started by Heather Booth — to train new organizers in community organizing. And they still exist today, they do a wonderful job. They've trained, I don't know, tens of thousands — thousands. Thousands and thousands of organizers. And they were really helpful, particularly in the early 70s and helping to shape an approach to organizing that a new wave of community and citizen organizers were taking up.

BANKS NUTTER: And how would you define that approach? How was it different, maybe, from previous organizing models? What was the organizing approach that in the early days of 9to5 you were trying to achieve?

NUSSBAUM: Well, for 9to5, it was a practical organizing that met people where they were with the kinds of issues that they had and set out to both engage constituents, in our case, clerical workers, help them learn to be leaders through experiences of organizing and offer everything in small bites — well, first you invite someone to a meeting and then you ask them to bring the snacks to the second meeting and then you ask if they could make a small presentation at the third meeting, and then could they bring a friend to the fourth meeting. And then to have those kinds of things for people to do. We always had events, activities, programs,

actions that were going in the organization. So the organization never sat still. We were always handing out a survey in front of the insurance companies or confronting the Chamber of Commerce or defending a secretary who'd been fired unfairly by her boss, or arranging to do a picket line at lunch time in front of the State House and having all the press there.

So the idea was to continually have actions, to set achievable goals so we could have victories and to have our membership be the activists, the spokespeople, the leadership of all of our activities.

**BANKS NUTTER:** Now, maybe in the time when you're in the thick of it, the conscious thoughts of how you do things are often not necessarily clear, and I assume others of you had been involved in student activism or antiwar activism — looking back now, how much of that influenced the way in which you sought out to initially organize 9to5?

**NUSSBAUM:** Well, I think the approach for 9to5 was similar and different in significant ways. It was similar in that we always wanted to reach a large number of people to be really about big change with lots of people, that we never saw ourselves as a small internal group that was going to develop a political line that would unveil the truth. So that was similar to my work in the peace movement and the student movement. It was different in that we were really trying to reach people who weren't necessarily already with us, that these were people who didn't identify as activists, who didn't start off with particularly conscious understanding of what they felt was wrong, and that we had to make what our project was about be much more limited. We were about rights and respect for women office workers. And that we used a language that was accessible to everybody.

We defined our goals as being ones that were understandable and appealing to most people that we talked to, and so that it wasn't about teaching people a radical analysis. That wasn't the point. It was more: you've got a problem on the job. It's probably related to the fact that you're a woman, and it's not any accident. Your boss benefits from it. So if we want to change that, we need to first of all, do it together, and also understand that we have to create power to confront the power of the boss. So, that was a lot to bite off in and of itself, but it was a lot different from analyzing that the problem with the war in Vietnam was a system of imperialism and, you know, that that's what we had to root out. So — it was very different in that way.

**BANKS NUTTER:** Along those same lines, then, and again, I'm focusing on the early years before you went national — we'll get to that — but what were some of the biggest challenges when you started out as a group?

NUSSBAUM: You know, actually it went so well. It was really very gratifying and surprising. And also, we could do so much with so little. We earned nothing. I think we earned \$50 dollars a week. I don't even know if it was minimum wage. Me and Ellen — we were the first two staff people, and I was still for a long time working as a clerical worker and just doing this work as a volunteer and most of us, actually, worked as volunteers, the activists. But we kept coming across success. When we wrote the newsletter, people wrote back. When we called our first meeting, 150 people showed up. When we confronted the Chamber of Commerce, they responded. They responded badly and that turned out to be great. When we called the meeting to decide what we should do next, we got 25 people to come and these were all people who weren't political activists. They didn't conceive of themselves as people who normally joined an organization, they just thought, "This sounds right. This is about me."

The way we recruited activists was to have lunch meetings with them and so on the lunch hour, our staff and our activists would go out and meet with total strangers, people who had signed a survey or had called up for more information, and some days I had three lunch meetings. And there was just a tremendous amount of activity. And we also found out that we could apply what we were doing in Boston in other cities and so over the course of several years, we helped start what turned out to be about a dozen similar organizations around the country.

The other thing is that the press would cover us all the time. And we were really a tiny organization, but we had a very big voice and I think it was because of a couple of factors. One was that we really did express what was going on in the minds of many, many women and the press understood that. It was because we were also expressing what women in the press were feeling as well. I think that's part of what was going on. So we got it right, and we were able to leverage very few resources into a big impact, and so it was a very heady time.

BANKS NUTTER: I wonder — I know that in Boston racial tensions were pretty high in '74 and '75; the school desegregation and class issues there seemed particularly intense. In the early years of 9to5 were there racial tensions? Were there class tensions? As you were doing the organizing?

NUSSBAUM: On the whole, no, there weren't those tensions. We built a multiracial, cross-class organization by focusing on what people had in common. We were there to talk about the problems in the workplace for women workers, to identify an unfair system of employment as the source of the problem, and that the solution was to band together to confront power. And that appealed to working-class and middle-class women. It appealed to whites and blacks and scape-goating wasn't something that fit into our framework. You know, the problem on the job wasn't that black women were coming into the workplace. The problem was the

boss. So — we were conscious about it. We were conscious in how we developed leadership and made sure that we maintained an integrated organization in as many ways as we could, and it worked.

**BANKS NUTTER:** Among all those high points, what was perhaps the easiest connection to make? The boss piece?

**NUSSBAUM:** No. In a way, people were very inchoate about what was going on. We, in fact, we used a language that was so mild. We never used the word “organize” because who knows what “organize” means. To this day, you can talk to a local union leader and say, “Well we need to have a session about organizing.” And they think, maybe that’s like, Should I get a different kind of address book to keep myself better organized? you know, it’s really not a term that exists in the public at large. Negotiating wasn’t something that existed in the public at large. Discrimination wasn’t even a term that most people understood or accepted as a description of their work.

And so we talked about, we need more respect on the job, we’re not paid fairly. We often train men to become our own supervisors. It’s time we sat down and talked to the boss about these things. And it had to be as mild as that, because there was the public notion of what was going on in the workplace was that secretary was a great job, that it was a lot better than working in a factory, it was a lot better than being a waitress, and it was quite a shock to us when we actually looked at the statistics and found out that secretaries earned less than factory workers, earned less than waitresses. So the whole thing was a sham. And we had to unpeel the layers of this, one by one, to help people understand that they’d been taken in, but to come to that understanding in a way that wasn’t so hurtful that they then became paralyzed.

**BANKS NUTTER:** Now, you already mentioned that in other cities, there were people reaching out, contacting you, or whatever. There were organizations or nascent ones starting, how did that process — how did you all start coming together?

**NUSSBAUM:** Organizations grew up around the same time: in Boston, 9to5, in Chicago, Women Employed, and in San Francisco, Women Organized for Employment. There were similarities and differences but more or less they were along the same lines. And so the three of us began to work together and then, over time, there were friends in other places. I called up my friend Helen Williams in Cleveland to say, “Boy, this stuff is great. You should do one of these.” And so she created Cleveland Women Working. And then she had a friend in Dayton named Sherry Holmes and she called up Sherry and said, “Boy, you know, try this out. This is a lot of fun.” And so, Sherry created Dayton Women Working. I found people in Providence, Rhode Island, and they started an

organization. And so, I began traveling to help people who seemed interested in creating new organizations along the lines of 9to5.

BANKS NUTTER: Spreading the word and then at a certain point, there was an organized decision to create a national organization?

NUSSBAUM: Right.

BANKS NUTTER: Was there a big meeting? I mean, how did that come about?

NUSSBAUM: A number of the organizations had been working together for some time. We raised money to operate as a coalition and then raised, I guess, additional money, to expand and create new organizations and went through whatever decision-making there was to become a single national organization where we would pool our resources to accomplish something nationally while continuing to work independently in our own individual cities.

BANKS NUTTER: So that was the structure from the beginning? There was a national but each of the locals were autonomous?

NUSSBAUM: Yes. The locals were autonomous but we joined together as a national organization, to plan joint national program, to do some joint national fundraising, to train our local staff with national staff. So it was a national organization with internal staffing and planning. And I guess we paid the local staff out of the national budget but then also tried to raise local money to supplement — frankly, I can't remember exactly how it worked. We had national staff in several cities as well as hiring other local staff. At one point, we had over fifty staff and offices in about twenty cities. Yeah, it was a big organization.

You asked earlier, what were the challenges, and as I said, we did an awful lot with very little, you know. If we'd ever actually had significant resources, maybe we would have been bigger, more significant. The biggest challenge was building a big membership base, and that's what never happened. We were an organization that had tremendous impact, both on the real lives of working women — we changed policies at workplaces. We would go confront the banks in a city. We did a big national banking campaign all over the country one year. And not only did we get the Office of Federal Contract Compliance Programs at the department of labor to change its focus and to take up enforcement in banking as a priority and then to aggressively go out to banks instead of just sitting passively and waiting to take companies that they had to review in some kind of random order, so we forced a focus on this industry. We confronted individual banks and what we found, much to our surprise, we thought, let's go after something winnable, like, they have to post jobs and they have to

promote women. Well, in order to kind of make sure that they didn't face trouble with their workers, they started giving raises. And so we found — we're actually raising these women's salaries. And so then, we started to demand higher raises because it turned out that we could do that. And that our organization had the power to change the behavior of employers to develop leadership among women workers, to change policy at the city and state and federal levels.

But we were not able to build a membership of hundreds of thousands or millions of women and that part of it never fell into place. And we kept thinking, well, we'll give it another five years and then we'll — our ambition was always to be a mass organization, and we ended up not being a mass organization in the sense of a continued paid membership, but an organization that affected, that leveraged change on a mass level.

**BANKS NUTTER:** Why do you think that was, that that piece was missing?

**NUSSBAUM:** I still don't know, to tell you the truth. There are certain things you can accomplish in different historical periods. It's the kind of organization that is not inherently stable because you don't deliver every year. It's the kind of thing that people join when they are inspired or have a problem but the next year, when they have moved on to something else, they don't rejoin. It's all those kinds of things about those kinds of organizations. And in fact, it turns out, I think, that this kind of citizen's organization is more ephemeral in that way, that that's a more typical structure than what we thought. We'd come out of the antiwar movement or the peace movement where no one was really a member of anything. Nobody paid dues to anything, but you had the sense of millions of people, because millions of people would show up for things. And so, we had this old notion of what it meant to be a mass movement and we were trying to apply it in a more structured, organizational framework and of course, organization and movement are not the same thing and almost rarely occur at the same time. But we didn't know that then. And so we had different ambitions.

The other thing is that where you get organization of real size in the workplace is a union. It's not an advocacy organization that comes up and attacks individual issues and makes change. And so, we hadn't really put that together. We did within a couple of years and we created our own union, but it was something that can both deliver on the workplace every day and involve people every day because it has standing and power. That's a union. 9to5 was never really in a position to be that.

**BANKS NUTTER:** I'm curious what the relationship was in the '70s and early '80s between 9to5 the organization and other feminist organizations, like NOW, and CLUW, which was founded in the midst of this, the Coalition for Labor

Union Women, and even more radical women's groups like Bread and Roses. What was 9to5's relationship with these groups?

NUSSBAUM: You know, on a practical level, there wasn't much of a relationship. The work of the more traditional women's organizations and the language of the more traditional women's organizations really didn't speak to our membership.

BANKS NUTTER: By that, you mean NOW, basically?

NUSSBAUM: NOW, for example, yeah. We were really about employment issues for lower-wage women. And we did not confront directly the more cultural issues about men in your life and whether there were social services around issues. Those were very important issues for women that hadn't been acknowledged before, whether it was rape or violence in the home or whatever. But, it wasn't our focus. So there really wasn't that much that those organizations brought. I'm sure we aligned with them on certain things and I know that we worked with — there were only a handful of women in the labor movement, anyway, in any kind of leadership role, but we worked with them. There were a couple of great women from the IBEW and someone from the CWA that we worked with very closely. We had a big campaign against AT&T around maternity benefits because AT&T was the chief lobbyist against instituting maternity benefits at the state level. So we worked with the women who were represented by the CWA at AT&T and we picketed the State House. And so, there were a lot of things along those lines that were fun.

And we also had good relations with more of the labor union women than — well, actually, that's not true. Often in these cities, there would be women's commissions or local women's coalitions that had grown up in the local city that were a combination of local organizations and we would work with them on issues. But in fact, I think what we were was an extension of the women's movement into the working class, and we brought women's concerns into the labor movement and we brought the women's movement into the workplace, to working-class women.

BANKS NUTTER: So, did 9to5 or you personally have a role in the founding of CLUW?

NUSSBAUM: No, because I wasn't in a union. So, it wouldn't have occurred to me. My friend Jackie Ruff, who then later became one of the founders of our union, District 925, did go to the founding CLUW convention because she was working in a paste-up shop and was a member of the graphic artists' union. And, actually, they were on strike for months and months and months, but it was while she was, I think, on strike with the graphic artists that she went to the CLUW convention.

**BANKS NUTTER:** I want to get to the union, but still have a couple more questions about *9to5*. The movie [*9 to 5*] — did *9to5*, the organization, have anything to do with the making of the movie? I mean, how did that all happen?

**NUSSBAUM:** I knew Jane Fonda from my work in the peace movement. We were both part of the same organization, the Indochina Peace Campaign, and when the war really did end in 1975, Jane was looking more toward working on issues in our country, you know, some domestic issues. *9to5* had already been active for a couple of years by then and Jane was intrigued by it and so she came to me and she said she wanted to make a contribution to our work in the best way she knew how, and that was to make a major motion picture. So, that sounded great to us!

And it just was an extraordinary experience. Jane wanted to know more about what office workers thought about their jobs, and so early on, we invited her to come to Cleveland where I was living by then and our Cleveland chapter set up a meeting with about forty office workers, women office workers, with Jane and, I think, one of the script writers, and we spent a long night talking about what were the problems that they faced on the job and have they ever dreamed about getting even with the boss, and then, after that, there were some other sessions with some of our members in other places. And then, ultimately, every detail in the movie, with the exception of hanging the boss up by a garage opener system, actually came from these women. And, it was just great.

We looked at the script, we were able to comment on things and then, when the movie came out — actually, before the movie came out, Jane went and did a tour, she went to about eight or ten of our cities and we had thousands of women in these nighttime events with Jane where she was talking about what she's learned by working on *9to5*, and this was before the movie came out, and then the movie came out and we did benefits with Jane and, and then I went on a tour called the Movement Behind the Movie and went on a 20-city tour and I did press. I'd go in the morning and I'd get on those early morning television shows. At that time, just about every city had its own local morning television show where they did recipes and what was happening at the zoo, and outsider guests coming in. We would show a clip of the movie and then I'd talk about what was really going on and how office workers all around the country were standing up for themselves and do press, and then hold a meeting with office workers in the evening in that city. And this was 1980.

The movie became the Number 1 box office hit of the year and soon after, we were an organization with 25 chapters around the country. It was the best example I've ever seen of popular culture helping to lift organization and movement. This combination of an existing movement that needed popular culture to take the lid off and move it to a new stage.

I sat in the movie theaters many times watching the movie and in every instance, you'd get the same feeling. The place was electrified. The women would be shouting and clapping and I remember one time sitting in a movie theater and there's the early scene where Jane is the new secretary on the job and she has to go use the very complicated copier machine and papers are flying all over and she doesn't know how to make it stop and she's all flustered and the whole thing is complete chaos, and a woman stood up in the theater and said, "Push the star button!" So these women were totally engaged and the men who were with them in the theater were like amused but silent because they felt like something dangerous might be going on here. And all of this was in the context of a movie that was not a brilliant movie. You know, it wasn't Charlie Chaplin. It wasn't the greatest thing you'd ever seen but it spoke to women who had never been acknowledged.

I had to write a background memo for Jane to take to the studio to make her case that this had an audience. Because the fact is, that outside of — with the exception of Ann Southern playing Susie the Secretary in the '50s on television, there was not a single movie or television depiction of a central character who was a woman office worker. And the fact was, that one out of three women worked as office workers. It was the biggest, most invisible part of the society that existed. And that we said, "There is a base for this. Talk to these women and they will talk back." And sure enough, they did.

**BANKS NUTTER:** So this was not only an incredible tool of outreach, but there were benefits done and that brings me to another question. What was your funding base for 9to5 in the '70s and '80s?

**NUSSBAUM:** Let me actually just go back one moment on the movie —

**BANKS NUTTER:** Oh, yeah, sure.

**NUSSBAUM:** The most important effect of the movie was to change public consciousness, that this farce, this comedy had the effect of ending the debate about whether there was discrimination in the workplace. Before that, we had had to argue carefully, make proof, help women understand their lives in a different framework, argue to bosses that in fact this wasn't the natural order and it wasn't that women wanted low-paying, dead-end jobs. You had to fight hard on this issue about whether there was discrimination or not, and then Jane Fonda makes a movie that mocks discrimination in the workplace and the argument is over, because women have been poised on the edge of their chairs, ready to understand it this way and then this capped it and it made it, the behavior of bosses and the discrimination, the object of ridicule. So, that the debate then became what we should do about it. And that is exactly

what I think the role of popular culture can be in a social context, and I think it's really the best example that I know of, of making that happen.

**BANKS NUTTER:** It's interesting. I've used it as a teaching tool. But the importance of popular culture and its importance for the movement I wasn't as aware of.

So anyway, to get back to the funding question, and as you get into the '80s, that funding piece may have shifted and been more challenging, but throughout, what was your funding base?

**NUSSBAUM:** We raised dues from our members, but it wasn't enough to sustain an organization. We always did fundraising activities. We had auctions and benefits and activities like that. But most of our funding came from foundations. And that was always both a challenge and a problem. It was a real inhibitor. Foundations wanted to fund things that they were interested in, they wanted to see reports produced and research done rather than women trained to confront their bosses, particularly, and — although some did, but there was rarely funding for what we felt was our central mission.

And then we never got the kind of support that other women's organizations that didn't confront major corporations got. We would be told by program officers at foundations, "Well, we couldn't get this through the board because so many of our board members sit on the boards of corporations and you recently, you know, attacked AT&T on their maternity benefits and so the board members of AT&T don't want to fund your organization." So we never achieved a level of stability that either other women's organizations did or certainly other men's organizations did.

We also existed at a time when even though we were a worker's organization, even though we did a lot of things that were funded by foundations much more generously if you were not an organization focused on women, we didn't get those monies. We were always in the category of women's grant making and at that time, I think about 4 percent of foundation money went to women's grant making. And you can never break out of women's grant making and become leadership development or economic development, or whatever else we were, health and safety, because we were pigeonholed as women. But, you know, who cares.

We also had a period during the Carter administration when we got government funds to do great work. It was wonderful. And that's when we were able to hire staff in a number of cities. We would do programs. We did an oral history project that was funded by the National Endowment of the Humanities where we did oral histories in ten cities and we were able to put on staff to do that work who could also, as they were working with these women, help them in their activism on issues as well. So, it was great.

BANKS NUTTER: My understanding is you're no longer officially connected with 9to5 and haven't been since, I guess, '93, when you entered the government.

NUSSBAUM: Right.

BANKS NUTTER: But could you still maybe speak to where it's at today? Thirty years later?

NUSSBAUM: I'm close to the leadership of 9to5. When I left, Ellen Bravo became the director. She's wonderful, she's dynamic, smart, great leader, wonderful in developing new leaders. The organization is more focused on low-wage women, welfare-to-work women. It doesn't actually, probably, have much of a focus on office work at all at this point. It's much more of an amalgam of a group of bigger category of even lower wage working women. And I think that they also are more focused on individual leadership development and research on issues that are like welfare to work and giving voice to women who are in that situation. So, our ambition of trying to be a mass organization, as unfulfilled as it was, really doesn't characterize 9to5 today but they continue to be one of the most important, genuine spokespeople for unorganized, low-wage women in the country.

END TAPE 2

## TAPE 3

BANKS NUTTER: Well, just one last question about 9to5 30 years later. Is there anything you might have done differently when you look back? At the time you were with it?

NUSSBAUM: No, no. We just did our best. We did our best with what we knew and what was available to us at the time. I don't know that we could have done better.

BANKS NUTTER: Switching to Local 925. I know you've told that story, too, before, but if you could sort of recap again, what are the connections? How is it separate? How is it not? You've got the name piece there. How did that move to organized labor happen to you all?

NUSSBAUM: We started 9to5, the association, in Boston in 1973 and within a couple of years, we had already done actions and companies had committees in dozens of workplaces, and we would organize a group of women to go confront their boss, for example, a pregnant worker at a publishing house, we took ten of our members in and we got to meet with the boss to insist that there should be maternity benefits for this worker and the others in her workplace. And the boss said, "We'll get back to you." And that was the typical experience. Remarkably, our little organization with no standing could meet with the employers and companies around the country where we had workers from that company and then they were reinforced by our other members, and the boss would always say, "Well, that's very interesting. We'll get back to you." And then they never got back to us. And that's when we began to understand. We said, "We need something that forces them to get back to us. There should be a law about this." And then, of course, we found out that there was a law. It's called the National Labor Relations Act, that if you organize the majority of people in the workplace, then the employer is obligated to bargain with you.

At this time, we were actually taking a labor education course with a labor educator in Boston named Frank Lyons and learning about unions and so on. Unions had never really entered our minds when we were originally organizing 9to5, because they weren't part of the life of women office workers. They weren't part of our lives. It wasn't something that really occurred to us. And it was at one point that Frank said to us, "So, what are you going to do when your members want to unionize?" And we said, "Oh, well, we'll refer them to a union." And he said, "Well, boy, you're a fool. You're going to do all the work and then you're going to give them away to somebody else? Who knows what kind of organization they're going to be in? Create your own union."

So, we said, “Oh, OK.” [laughs] and with the, you know, ignorance of youth, we went about deciding we would create our own union.

And so, we approached about ten different unions, with our demands, that we wanted to have a charter, we wanted to create our own local union that would have our own character, and we wanted funding to do that so we could hire our own staff to do the organizing. And, we brought nothing to it. We had no members to bring to the union. All we had was this track record of being able to speak to workers in this occupation.

And so, some of them just said, “Oh, that’s ridiculous.” Some of them said, “You couldn’t possibly do that in our structure.” Some of them said, “Oh, you look like good organizers. We’ll hire you to go work someplace else.” Some of them were abusive and insulting. And then, finally, the Service Employees Union had a general organizer named John Geagon who met with us and made a deal with us, and was able to get us a charter for District 925 — Local 925 in Boston, we were just a local union in Boston at that point, and funding. Not very much, but funding to hire three organizers. And so I left 9to5 the organization to become an organizer and director for the new union and we hired two other staff: Jackie Ruff, my friend from the antiwar movement and a woman named Doreen Levasseur, who was a clerical worker at Boston College, who I just thought had a lot of pizzazz. And she sure did. She’s a union organizer today, still.

So, we didn’t know anything, and we started our own union. And we had yet another guy who was really helpful to us, a guy named Joe Buckley, who’s still an organizer today as well, who showed us the ropes, trained us, helped us figure out how you actually went about this, and we started organizing.

**BANKS NUTTER:** What beyond the sort of not knowing or not perceiving of organized labor as an option for 9to5 the association, what were some of the other hesitations that 9to5 the association might have had or you had, personally, at the time about moving into the house of labor?

**NUSSBAUM:** Well, I think we originally didn’t think about unions for two reasons. One is that unions were really not organizing office workers. There was no organization going on. There was the Office and Professional Employees Union but it was very small and primarily it represented office workers in the unions. And so, there was no organizing going in this sector. There was public sector organizing going on among clerical workers in the public sector, but for the most part, there really wasn’t much happening. And, in the earlier period, of course, during the student movement and the peace movement, unions, for the most part, were seen as against the peace movement, in support of the war. I mean, that was only one part of the labor movement, but that was the public perception.

And so, it never occurred to me that unions were a force for social change. That was kind of ignorant, but that was the time that I lived in. That was the milieu. That wasn't where the impetus for change was coming in society, and that's why it didn't occur to us that that's where it should be. Now, they were, like, totally male-dominated institutions, of course, and that's why what we ended up with was so interesting. It was so right for us to get our own charter. We were able to just build what we wanted in the way we wanted to and we weren't even deliberate about it, and it was like what we'd done with 9to5. We just followed our nose. We just did what we thought would work. And because there wasn't a model that we had to meet and we weren't answering to someone who had their own notions about what would work, the only way you could do things, we were free to do our organizing, to structure our organization, to identify leaders in a fresh way. And as a result, 90 percent of our staff were women and 90 percent of our leaders were women and 90 percent of the members in the workplace that we organized were women, and it never presented itself as a problem for us. It never was a challenge to find a capable woman to do anything. And we were unique in the labor movement in that regard.

**BANKS NUTTER:** How did the relationship work between 9to5 the association and Local 925, which is part of SEIU?

**NUSSBAUM:** Well, for most of the time that I was there, for most of twenty years, I held the top leadership in both organizations. I was the president of the union which within a few years became a national union in 1981, and I was the executive director of 9to5. And so, we were able to effectively see the organizations as sister organizations with the same goals but different organizational structures and tactics to achieve them. And the goal was also to create a genuine movement of women office workers. And we always saw that as needing different organizational forms and being able to benefit from an outside the union piece that was able to garner public attention and reach out very broadly and determine public issues. And then, an aspect of the organizing that was inside the labor movement that was building sustained power for women workers and changing the labor movement. And this was all, you know, incredibly lofty. And I don't mean to sound like a big head or something, but we had big goals and some of them we achieved, and some of them we didn't. But it was fun.

**BANKS NUTTER:** Well, if you can say that, that's probably the best thing. There's an oral history you did a few years ago with Sue Cobble and Alice Kessler-Harris, it's reprinted in *Talking Leadership*. In it, you said, and I quote you, "In Local 925, we had an organization that had the character and concerns of the working women's movement but the power of a trade union." Can you tell me what, in reality, on a day-to-day basis, an

organization like that looks like? What it felt like? What does that mean in practical terms?

NUSSBAUM: Well, part of it was what I was saying before, that we were a union that was naturally led by women, that represented women, and that in itself was, like, big news. We met workers when they could meet, so it meant that we held meetings with workers at lunch hour instead of night, which is when most unions held meetings. If women had to take care of their children, they could bring them to the meetings, and we provided childcare. These were not like conscious, deliberate, “how do we come up with new tactics to approach women.” They came naturally out of the organization because that’s who we were and that’s what would work. But they were enormous departures from most unions because we were organizations that were about women and led by women. That came across in the literature that we did, the way we talked to people, the emphasis on repeated discussions with people, we didn’t expect that you’d lay down a [membership] card and get someone to sign up. You know, we knew it took five conversations with every person we were going to talk to before they would warm up to the idea about what it meant to do this scary thing, to join a union.

And all of that is, I know, just good organizing but it had to come out of the character of the working women’s movement which had to create all of our tactics from scratch. So we just applied those lessons to the union and that turned out to be different.

Now, you talked earlier about that there was 9to5 the organization and then Local 925. Well, we did call everything 9to5, and we did it on purpose. We had 9to5 the association and we had 925 the union and we had 9to5 the movie and we wanted that confusion. We thought that was a healthy confusion, because we wanted people to think of this as all bound together in some way, the character of the working women’s movement, the power of the union, and the glamour of Hollywood. And that seemed to us a powerful package, and one you didn’t want to tease apart and have operate in the public mind as totally separate, uncombinable entities.

BANKS NUTTER: And so, at this point, what has Local, or now, the national 925, in terms of organizing, where is it at? You made it through the ’80s, which was not a friendly decade to labor, but I know, again, you’re officially not connected, but –

NUSSBAUM: Right. I’m a member of both 9to5 the association and District 925, SEIU but I’m not a leader in either, but I’m close to the leaders of both organizations and admire them all. The union succeeded as well as any union at the time. For most of those years, we added ten percent to our membership every year. So we were a successful organizing union. We negotiated good contracts, we built good leadership, but we never

actually built a base in private-sector clerical women. And in a way, I've always thought that we were right about so much in 9to5. We were right about a wave of organizing among women workers that was based on their growing consciousness as women and a desire for equality and women seeing themselves as permanent workers, not temporary workers, and willing to fight for change on the job. And in fact, you know, in the last 25 years, for every one of those years, women have outnumbered men as new members of union membership and the vast majority of successes in union organizing campaigns are in women-dominated workplaces.

So we were right about all that but we were wrong about the jurisdiction [i.e., group of workers]. You still don't see women in banks and insurance companies and big corporations joining unions. So, we didn't succeed there. Today, our union is primarily located in Seattle. We've got about 10,000 members in Seattle. And the other branches of the union have now merged with other parts of SEIU. But we believe there's an important legacy in the work that we did that goes on.

**BANKS NUTTER:** Now, what is it about the private sector that inhibited growth — is it something that could be overcome, possibly, in the future? What was it?

**NUSSBAUM:** You know, it was a great mystery, and I hope that historians help us figure out why it never happened. I think that, there were a couple of safety valves that came in to place, that because the pressure of the women's movement, higher-level jobs opened up to women. And so now, today, more women workers are white-collar managerial workers than clerical workers. That's a reverse of what had been true before. Women still have a pay gap. They still are nowhere in the top reaches of corporations and all the rest of it, but there was movement for women in the high-level jobs. There was a split in the clerical work force where, partly through technology, where some jobs were upgraded. Jobs were remixed because of the skill mix with technology, and many of the lower-level jobs were made into contingent work, they became contracted-out work. There were the workers who had an attachment, who worked directly for the employer that they worked for.

So there were shifts in the structure of the workforce and the structure of the workplace, and some opportunities for women that I think diffused the demand for change among these private-sector women, who also, of course, always faced gigantic opposition from their employers. So, in the public sector where you have far less resistance from the employer, you still get plenty, but there's far less, women do organize and probably close to the majority of women in the public sector are in unions.

And similarly, you've got women in institutions of higher education, which often behaved like private-sector employers, always fought

organizing but, after ten-year bloody battles, women office workers did succeed in organizing in many of the institutions of higher education.

**BANKS NUTTER:** That's a good point, the impact of technology has historically been part of that shift. Well, OK, I'd like to shift — our last hour — to what appears to be, at least to me in reading about it, what must have been a big shift for you to the Women's Bureau in 1993. You left all that for government work. How did that happen? Bob Reich call up one day?

**NUSSBAUM:** No, no. It was actually John Hiatt, who was the general council at the Service Employees Union and a friend of mine, called me up right after — it was sometime after the election. It was like Christmas vacation or something and said, "How would you like to be the director of the Women's Bureau?" I said, "Hmmm.... I don't think so. Why do you ask?" And people in Washington were thinking about, Oh, who should we try to get into the department of labor?

**BANKS NUTTER:** You weren't in D.C. then?

**NUSSBAUM:** No, I had been living in Cleveland for 15 years. And so, John Sweeney [then president of SEIU] actually proposed me as a candidate for director of the Women's Bureau. And at first, I was not really very interested. I liked my job, I felt totally committed to my organizations, and I didn't see a reason to leave then. The Women's Bureau hadn't featured very large in my life. But fortunately, actually, it was John Sweeney who gave me a kick in the butt about it and said, "Are you crazy? This is a great opportunity. Of course you should do this."

And I took his advice and he was exactly right. I was fortunate enough to be chosen by Bob Reich to be the director of the Women's Bureau and it was a gas. It was the ability to take a completely different vantage point and a whole different set of resources to try to work on the same kinds of issues that I had always worked on. And this was 1992, '93. You know, we weren't steaming ahead organizing workers in the unions. The union movement was facing terrible opposition. Membership growth was falling. We were facing tremendous obstacles. So it wasn't like, Oh, I was abandoning something that was moving ahead and I thought, Well, maybe I could do something from the vantage point of government to open up new opportunities that would help do things in a way that we needed, that couldn't be done just from the ground. And so that's what I set out to do.

And I was amazed at how much I could do. I remember, at one point, giving a speech to some group of women workers somewhere and I just gave a speech like a 9to5 speech and I remember saying, "Boy, is this what government sounds like?" And I found that because I had a good secretary of labor and because I had an agency with a very malleable mandate. Its official mandate was to improve the lot of wage-

earning women — it wasn't exactly those words, but that's basically what it is, and then you could interpret it in anyway you wanted. We didn't have a line responsibility. We weren't enforcing any laws or regulations, and so, I really had the resources of the whole department to do whatever I wanted with, within the framework of improving the welfare of wage-earning women. Wow, that was easy. So, we were able to take this \$10 million agency with 80 staff and 10 offices around the country in addition to our Washington office, and turn it into a real fighting machine for women in every kind of occupation. So, that was very exciting to me, too, to learn about the work lives of women, not just in clerical work, but in every occupation.

**BANKS NUTTER:** So, it sounds like it must have been pretty heady when you went to 80 staff, but did you particular goals when you first started out?

**NUSSBAUM:** Oh, yeah. And that's where my experience of 9to5 really was terrific. I had been living and breathing program and outreach as the way you make change for twenty years by then, and so, I just applied those skills to this government agency. The first thing that we did was to reach out to working women to find out what their priorities were and so we did a survey, the mother of all surveys. I had done a million surveys over my years, and this time, we did one that we called "Working Women Count" but because we were the government, we got ten daily newspapers to run the whole survey in their newspaper, and we got — I don't know, a dozen women's magazines to run the survey, and we got it all over the place. And we got hundreds, and maybe a thousand partner organizations to distribute this survey. We ended up with over 300,000 returns. No one had every seen anything like this.

We also did a national random sample telephone survey, to confirm our results and one of the things that was the most interesting was that the telephone survey completely mirrored the results of our self-selected folks who had written in. And I think that's because we had done such a good job of reaching into every corner of the country. We ran the survey in six different languages and had it distributed in Mandarin and Vietnamese and Spanish and Portuguese and so, it was just a terrific experience.

And then, women told us what they cared about. And the other really important thing was that their primary concerns really echoed throughout the workforce, and they were very uniform across race and class, crossing regions. Equal pay was their number one priority. That came across loud and clear, and that was kind of a surprise, because it had been a sleeper issue for years. Work and family issues, work hours, and childcare were also big priorities.

And so we had a mandate to work on issues on behalf of women. It wasn't something that we made up. We had this mandate. And we also had a base. We were working with people and we knew people in every

community around the country who had worked with us on the survey and so, we did that. And at the same time we were doing all kinds of things that were the role of government but really hadn't been necessarily done out of the Women's Bureau, at least for some time. We held a women's conference on labor law reform. The department of labor under the leadership of John Dunlop [former secretary of labor] was reviewing labor laws and making recommendations about whether they should be changed. So we held a conference and three or four hundred women came to it and provided testimony about why labor law reform was important to women workers. We had a conference on child labor at home and abroad. We did a conference in New York of sweatshop workers in the garment industry.

I was asked by workers at the Diamond Walnut factory in California to come out and hold a hearing with them — they had been locked out or were on strike, I can't remember, I think it was a strike, for some time and it was a very acrimonious strike. The employer was bitterly opposed to the union. And so, I went out and I convened a community meeting and I met with management and I met with the workers and recommended high-level mediation which the secretary of labor accepted as a recommendation and then we sent out mediators.

We held hearings for cocktail waitresses in Las Vegas who had health and safety problems from the outfits that they needed to wear and they were facing sexual harassment problems. I met with women executives in the biotech industry in Boston and I met with temporary workers and I met with grocery store clerks in Kansas City who talked to me about the crippling health and safety problems that they faced on their job. And I heard from workers at a potato plant in Idaho who worked the night shift and had to bring their children to sleep in their cars in the parking lot at night because there was no 24-hour childcare available. So we investigated what was happening there and ultimately wrote a report about 24-hour childcare and then began to work with communities and companies to set up those kinds of nighttime childcare alternatives for workers in their communities.

We held a conference for low-wage workers in the department of labor where two hundred low-wage workers from a wide variety of organizations came to the department of labor and then met with every agency in the department. I had a long-time employee of the department of labor come up to me in tears, a man who said, "This is what the department of labor should be about." You know, it was thrilling to be able to use the machinery of government in the interests of working women in all these different ways.

**BANKS NUTTER:** And I'm sure, you know, that since the end of World War I when the Women's Bureau was created, under some of your predecessors, there were moments of time when that was happening and then others, not. You mentioned the 24-hours daycare piece that you were involved with

there. What, in reality, beyond investigating and bringing to life those kind of concerns, what could the Women's Bureau, much less the federal government, do? Was there real change that you could effect for working women in that role?

NUSSBAUM: Well, on that, for example, I think we gave a grant to a community organization to encourage the creation of night-care alternatives and to provide resource information to members in the community. But no, we didn't have significant funds, we didn't have enforcement power. So we just had the leverage of being able to work with other departments in the department of labor and the kind of moral authority of government. I did very much see myself in the best traditions of the Women's Bureau. There had been magnificent directors, the very first director [Mary Anderson], who set the stage and created the integrity of the demand that women deserve to be heeded and needed to have special attention paid to their problems.

I most admired Esther Peterson, who had been a director of the Women's Bureau and I thought had utilized to the very greatest extent her powers. And, like I say, there are very few powers in the Women's Bureau, but she got the Equal Pay Act passed, just as one of her many accomplishments, and she was really able to do the best with the resources available to her in her political time. And I felt that that was the opportunity that was given to me and my mission.

BANKS NUTTER: Do you feel that you met that mission?

NUSSBAUM: I felt like I did my best. I felt like I tried to stay true to the primary goal, which was to reach out to and give voice to the concerns of average working women, to use the power of government to demand change, to use our ability to bring issues to the public, to create change in other parts of the government bureaucracy, the government machinery. And so, I think that we did that, but also it was limited. Clinton came in as a centrist. We couldn't even get minimum wage taken up in the government when the House and Senate were Democrat — when all three bodies, the executive, the House, and the Senate were all Democrats, and that was one of the goals of Secretary Reich. It wasn't strictly out of the Women's Bureau. But minimum wage, for God's sake, you couldn't get moved. Because it was a government that felt afraid, both afraid to be too bold on some of these worker issues, and a government that didn't feel accountable in any way to the labor movement. So, and then, of course, the House went Republican. And so there was no ability to actually move law by the second half of the first term.

And so, I felt I had pretty much done what I could do three years into the administration. Really, what I was interested in is power. You can't build power among workers from the government. You can only

help workers gain power, and by then, John Sweeney had waged a successful campaign to become the president of the AFL-CIO and I very much wanted to go back to building power, not just creating an opportunity for power from the government. So I went back to the labor movement.

**BANKS NUTTER:** You made that shift. Before we get to that, I wonder, even in the friendly Clinton administration, how it must have felt for an old antiwar activist, to be in government. Would you, in 1969, ever have imagined yourself there?

**NUSSBAUM:** No, of course not. You know, I think it was Ellen Goodman [columnist for the *Boston Globe*] who asked me, “Did you ever have a goal to be in government?” And I remember answering, “You know, I never had any goals whatsoever, you know, I never had a career goal in my life.” I always just wanted to do the next best thing that made sense, for the work that I love to do. And I’ve just always been really lucky that there’s been such gratifying and sometimes exciting opportunities, like being able to head up the Women’s Bureau.

**BANKS NUTTER:** Well, OK, in '96, you did return to the House of Labor and that was to head up the then newly created Working Women’s Department. Can you tell me a little bit about what that department was, and what its goals were, and its intent?

**NUSSBAUM:** Yes. John Sweeney and the team that was elected, Linda Chavez-Thompson and Rich Trumka, really wanted to open up the AFL-CIO and reach out to new constituencies and become a more aggressive organization that had programs, spoke to workers, engaged workers, took up new issues and so on and so they asked me to come to head up a new department for working women. And again, it was one of these things that we were able to just make up as we went along and so, I was really lucky, again, and we decided that what we wanted to do was be — not an organization that trained women or developed policy on issues. Many unions do that very well. They train their own members. They take positions on issues. They develop research materials. And instead, what we wanted to do was create programs that could engage women and bring our key issues to the public through activist programs.

So when I got to AFL-CIO, one of the first things I did was a survey. This time, we called it the Ask the Working Women Survey. And again, we do it because it works. We feel like we need to find out what women care about and again, it was a survey that was a popular survey. It wasn’t just for union women, it was for all women who work. And we got their priorities and used that as our mandate for our programs: equal pay, childcare, work hours — those were the things that keep coming up to the front and those were the things that we focused on. So over the

years, we ran a very aggressive equal pay campaign. We worked both at the federal level and introduced equal-pay legislation in thirty states. We're still working away to make those gains, but we've made gains in about ten states, I think.

We've worked very hard on paid family leave, and had a stunning victory in California through the California State Federation of Labor [Family Leave Act, 2003], working on other kinds of work-hours issues and so on. But the idea was to create a program, and by program, I mean, set out to change something, give people the activities that get them engaged, win victories along the way. Broadcast back to the public that you're fighting for this and you're winning, so that more people become involved.

**BANKS NUTTER:** So, part of the New Direction was to attract more women into organized labor? But yet, as you said, statistically, the numbers of women were greater coming in as new members over the last few years. What was your sense in 1996 of what was the AFL-CIO trying to accomplish? Was it a nod or — what was their real mission there?

**NUSSBAUM:** Oh, I think the real mission was to do several things. One is to make unions more relevant to women, so that more women wanted to use the power of unions to improve their lives. I mean, that's the primary mission. That meant we had to change unions, and it also meant we had to change women. We had to change unions so that they were relevant to women and we had to change women so that they felt like it was worth fighting for a better life. That's a big job. [laughs] And so we had to develop the programs that were going to help us to do that. So that was both internal change to the AFL-CIO and affiliated unions.

I also felt that while there was success in organizing women, it wasn't nearly what was out there, that there was this clear readiness among women workers for change, and we weren't anywhere close to taking advantage of it, to giving women the opportunities to organize and make change in their lives and that this opportunity was not something that was there forever. You know, history moves on. This is a moment in time when women felt ambitious and frustrated. Ambitious about their lives and frustrated about their opportunities and looking for leadership, for change, and that was our opportunity and shame on us if we don't take advantage of it.

**BANKS NUTTER:** Now, there's a piece that you have in *Not Your Father's Union Movement*, which came out in 1998, it's a great article, and you start by saying that in 1975, you had your astrological chart done and it predicted, and I quote you, "Many men in your life, old heavyset bald men with pinky rings." You've said that was part of the goal of the Working Women's Department to effect change within the affiliates, the

AFL-CIO itself and the affiliates. Has the labor movement changed in the last ten years or even last thirty?

NUSSBAUM: Yes. There's been lots of change in the labor movement. Certainly, more women are in staff positions. More women are in local leadership positions. More women are hired as organizers. All of that's a big change. Unions won't tell you today, You can't organize women because they think with their crotch, not their brains. All of that is very different than it was. You've had CLUW as an institution for close to thirty years. Women know that there's a voice for them once they're in unions. Many unions have women's programs or department.

But, very, very few women run unions. There are, right now, there are two women who are presidents of their unions. Sandy Feldman is president of AFT [stepped down, July 2004] and Melissa Gilbert is the president of SAG. [Cheryl Johnson is president of UAN, the nurses' union] Pat Friend was the president of AFA but they just affiliated with — the flight attendants — but they just affiliated with the Communication Workers. There are 60 affiliates of the AFL-CIO. Two are run by women. There are a handful of women who are secretary-treasurers. Women do not run unions.

The primary culture of the unions is still male. Maybe there is one woman who's an organizing director. And organizing directors — of a national union, I mean — organizing directors still will tell you that to be an organizer, you have to be prepared to give up your life, that you have to be on the road all the time, you have to work 24 hours a day, that women really aren't suited because after five or ten years, they're going to want to have children and take care of their children and so on. And it's this cowboy ethic that is unnecessary. Yeah, being an organizer's a hard job and it requires sacrifice but I'll tell you, we built a union that was based on women organizers. Women with children, half of them single women with children and we knew our children and got home for dinner, plenty of nights, and still built a union. Organized as many members as anybody else. So many essentials of the culture haven't changed and the basic leadership still hasn't changed.

BANKS NUTTER: Why is that, do you think?

NUSSBAUM: I think again it's safety valves, in a way. It reflects a larger movement. There really isn't much of a women's movement in our society today, you know. And there's not much of a women's movement, not much of a demand for women's equality within the union movement, just like there isn't in many other parts of our society. There's not pressure on top leaders to make these changes. Many of the women who came into unions when I did, or shortly thereafter, have made it up within their bureaucracies but they succeeded under the conditions that existed and haven't wanted or haven't been able to basically change those

conditions. So, if you've got women leaders who feel like it's not necessary or not politic to demand change, and male leaders who aren't feeling pressure, either from the base or at a higher level, change isn't going to come.

But it's in line with the history of women's activism in unions. So many times throughout history, women workers have revitalized the union movement, whether it was textile workers in the 1880s or garment workers in the 1910s, or waitresses and telecommunication workers in the '30s and '40 and teachers in the '60s: these were all overwhelmingly women workers who organized in the hundreds of thousands. Some, teachers, were in the millions in short periods of time, like a decade, who snatched unions out of extinction and brought life back into the union movement, but never won a place at the table, never won the structural changes that fundamentally altered the unions. And I hope that historians will tell us why and what we can do to finally change that.

**BANKS NUTTER:** That's the big question. You could have said it before in terms of ethnicity, but I wonder what piece race plays in keeping organized labor the way it is. I mean, the unions in which women predominate today — is there also a large contingent among them of non-White women as well?

**NUSSBAUM:** Yes. I think that people of color face the very same dilemma that women do. There has been tremendous organizing among people of color. People of color are much more pro-union, as a matter of fact, consistently. They are much more likely to organize, they're much more likely to fight on behalf of the union. But similarly, are less likely to lead unions. But I don't think that it's race that complicates women's position in unions.

**BANKS NUTTER:** Yes. It's the women piece. Well, given that, you know, what happened to the Working Women's Department?

**NUSSBAUM:** I guess, right after — it must have been after — I can't even remember anymore — it's been a bad period, you know. Gore didn't get the presidency, 9/11 happened. You know, hundreds of thousands of jobs were lost, there were tremendous pressures on unions, political pressures from an all-Republican government and economic pressures because of job loss, both on the public-sector side where there were big job losses and in the manufacturing side where there were just devastating job losses. Also, in transportation, one of the most highly unionized industries which had tremendous job loss. And attacks from the political side on the very integrity of the unions themselves.

So the AFL-CIO needed to cut back, restructure, and one of the cutbacks that they made was to eliminate the Working Women's

Department as a freestanding department, but to continue the work in other ways throughout the AFL-CIO. I'm now an assistant to the president. I work on a number of issues including directing all the women's programs within the AFL-CIO. The women's program primarily was moved — merged into the civil rights department. We have dedicated staff working on it there. We also have staff in the international affairs department that represents work we had been doing, and in the political department. So, in a way, there's as much work going on directed to women as there have been and it's better integrated throughout the institution.

But, eliminating the department, even if substantially it wasn't a big step back, politically, it was a signal and it was one that wasn't resisted. There really wasn't much resistance within the union movement to it. I think in fact it doesn't end up making much of a difference in what we do, but I think that it reflects the weakness of a movement among women for a gender perspective in the union movement, you know. Does it make a difference? I'm not sure it does.

BANKS NUTTER: Sort of a symbolic piece.

NUSSBAUM: Yes.

BANKS NUTTER: Are you disappointed, though?

NUSSBAUM: I was at the time, but I also felt like, you know, big deal, right? There's this work to be done. You can do this work in a lot of different ways. I would not stay in the union movement if I felt that there wasn't integrity to my work and real potential for what we're all doing together and I still feel that very strongly. I'm very excited about my work right now, as a matter of fact. We do work every year on Working Women Vote, focusing messages to women as voters and that has more power than it ever has. It's a real exciting program this year. So in some ways, stuff is better than ever.

On the international side, I'm working with women who head up their federations, who are the John Sweeneys of labor federations in other parts of the world and a very exciting program called Women's Rights are Workers' Rights on a global scale and that's at a level of the work that we've never done before. In some ways, the work has matured and is better than ever. But there are also just these tremendous weaknesses that I just think have to be acknowledged. This isn't about symbolism. It's about what's really there to work with and how do you do the best with what's really there, whether it's resources or political momentum.

BANKS NUTTER: Given all that you're doing, you probably haven't had a chance to look at Sue Cobble's new book —

NUSSBAUM: Oh, yeah, I have.

BANKS NUTTER: You have, yeah. As you may know, she concludes by saying, and I'm going to quote her, "Meeting the needs of working-class women will depend on a new class politics emerging within the larger women's movement as well as within organized labor." What would be the AFL-CIO response to that statement?

NUSSBAUM: You know, I don't really even know what that means, to tell you the truth. I mean, I didn't read the whole book but, no, I think that there does need to be a new generation of women leaders, and what they do with their concerns and these institutions has to be up to them. And I'm really excited to see what they do with it. One of my jobs is to help train young women staff, and I love doing it. I love getting my hands on these smart young things and teaching them everything I know, and then really seeing what they do with it and how they change it and what they make of it. So, it's not like I feel like I'm on my way out the door, I've got great work that I love to do, but I do feel like we've played out the '60s generation of the women's movement inside the labor movement, and we need to see what else is going to get cooked up.

END TAPE 3

## TAPE 4

**BANKS NUTTER:** OK. We're just going to wrap up here. I guess I'll start again by giving you another quote of yourself, quoting you back to you. In the oral history that you did at Michigan 25 years ago, you ended that session by saying, and I quote you, "I find, I think, that political activism is necessary and fulfilling and I wouldn't live any other way. And we'll pursue that in one way or another the rest of my life, I expect." End quote. Twenty-five years later, does that statement still stand?

**NUSSBAUM:** Oh, yeah. And it's not even very hard. I mean, I've lived a very privileged life. I'm lucky I get to do this work because it's great and it's what I want to do and it allows me to fight back against what I want to fight back against every single day. But, I also earn a good salary and I can raise my kids in a comfortable way and send them to college and not worry about their health insurance, and I get to travel and I get to work with the president of the Australian Labor Federation and meet the woman who is in jail for three years in Indonesia for leading a strike among workers, and go to South Africa for a meeting of the World Trade Unions, you know. Boy, who could ask for anything better?

**BANKS NUTTER:** You have children and a spouse. What impact has your professional life had on your personal life and vice-versa? I mean, we all know about the so-called double day, is that any shorter for working women today than when 9to5 started?

**NUSSBAUM:** Well, actually, there are these funny studies — there's one study that shows that in fact, between 1965 and 1985, women reduced their work hours and men increased their work hours in the home a little bit. But since 1985, men haven't increased their work hours one minute in the home. So, in fact, women are working more and more hours in the paid work force, they're spending less time at home. We all look around and see, there's a lot to do. I talk to women who have to work chronic overtime in the phone company, and one woman was telling me about how her son has learning disabilities and it just breaks her heart because she can't come home to help him do his homework. It's a big strain. How do you work a demanding job and spend time with your children and ever see your partner? It's hard. It's a lot harder for people who don't make very much money.

**BANKS NUTTER:** How does Karen Nussbaum, though, navigate that?

**NUSSBAUM:** Oh, I could have used a lot more grace, I think. I wish I had been less snappish with my children sometimes, but my husband and I have always raised our children ourselves. We've always been here. We've never had anybody live in our house with us. It's always been us and

our children. We feel like we've done right by them. We've got a really close family, and it hasn't been easy, but it's but it's been very gratifying.

I'd walk to the subway some mornings on my way to work after having hollered at the kids about getting ready or one thing or another and I'd say to myself, "I'm a witch, I'm a witch." Because I'd feel so dissatisfied with what I was able to do as a mother. But you know, really, you look at it on the whole and I love my kids, my kids love me. It works out in the wash.

**BANKS NUTTER:** I'm sure there's dads who have those moments, too, but it seems like it's a maternal guilt thing going on. Has that changed any for working women?

**NUSSBAUM:** Well, not nearly enough. Many people have written about the demands of the women's movement were to become equal with men as opposed to change the norm, so that men got more equal with women and the women that reorganized both how home life was done and how work was done. And instead, all that's happened is that women have increased their hours in the workforce and there are fewer hours that any parent's spending time with family. Communities are starved of community activists. Children are home alone much more often.

That isn't what we wanted, and it's not our fault for asking for the wrong thing. It was the response of powers that are bigger than we are, you know, the corporate response to globalization was to put the squeeze on workers, and that's meant in order to make ends meet, you've got to put more adult work hours and sometimes even teenage work hours into the paid workforce. So the standard of living and the control over time has gone down over the last 25 years. And it puts much more pressure on women, because women still are primarily responsible for the welfare of the family. And it's both their children and their elderly parents. And with fewer and fewer community or employer or government resources available.

**BANKS NUTTER:** So much of the rhetoric around working women, in the magazine at the checkout stand, it's a woman in a suit bouncing the baby and the briefcase in the other hand. How do the majority of working women respond to that?

**NUSSBAUM:** I'm not sure I would look at it quite that way. I think that the pain around jobs is more direct, that the jobs that are available are so contracted for so many people. The women who end up working at Wal-Marts don't think that they are really the people who are going to be in suits in the management office of the oil company — it's more like you used to be able to expect to be a secretary and wear decent clothes to work and get a lunch hour and have five days vacation and five sick

days. Well, you don't even get that, you know. You don't get the five days' sick leave and you don't get the vacation and in fact, you can be fired if you're sick. In fact, you're not even guaranteed your forty hours. I think it's more that the expectations of what a good life was for an average working-class or middle-class woman doesn't even exist. People are desperate just even to get health care on their jobs, much less have a management job. And I think there's real desperation and it's out of really bad working conditions as opposed to the disjuncture between reality and what people want.

**BANKS NUTTER:** And that kind of begs the question, then. What do you see as the solution to that? Is it through organized labor?

**NUSSBAUM:** Oh, yeah. I think that you need to have a stronger movement of workers that demands change from employers. I think we're going to be in really serious trouble if Bush is elected again. I think we're going to have to really hunker down. We have to think about what it's like in other really bad periods, because we're in one of those and it's only going to get worse.

On the other hand, on the bright side, a majority of workers who aren't in unions say they would vote for a union tomorrow if they had the chance. There's more pro-union sentiment than there has been in decades, since the '50s, probably. What we need to do is find ways to harness that power, whether through the traditional organized union structures or through creating new structures, and at the same time, find ways to reduce the resistance. Make it more possible for people to join unions. Right now, the labor laws are anti-worker. They prohibit the formation of unions rather than enable formation of unions, and we have to fight back and many unions and the labor movement as a whole have taken that on. But you do have to have the organized power of workers, or else workers will be even more marginalized than we are today.

**BANKS NUTTER:** What role do you think women can play in that?

**NUSSBAUM:** Oh, I think enormous. And I think it's not just in this country. I think it's global. You know, women are the fuel for the global workforce, and it's here in this country where women fill the low wage jobs, but also in Mexico and Thailand and all around the world where women who are recruited, like the mill workers were in the 1880s in this country from their farms and rural communities into manufacturing zones and are now doing the work, exploited work, at wages so low that they drain work from other parts of the world. But these women have now been in the workforce for ten years, or a generation, and their expectations are changing, just in the way that the women who entered the workforce here in this country in big numbers in the 1970s now conceive of themselves as full-time workers who can demand rights, and we're

seeing this all over the world. So I actually think that it's going to be the power of women workers around the globe that rewrites the global economy.

BANKS NUTTER: And if we can get organized labor to open up a little for women leaders?

NUSSBAUM: Well, I think it's going to be an impulse among women workers and the organized power of labor that once again has to come together and accommodate each other's demands and needs to fight the powers that be.

BANKS NUTTER: You've talked about what you're doing right now, and it sounds pretty exciting. You know, if you had a crystal ball, what do you — and depending, I guess, maybe on the election, what do you see yourself doing five years from now?

NUSSBAUM: I don't know.

BANKS NUTTER: Still something political?

NUSSBAUM: Oh, gosh, yeah. I'm only 53.

BANKS NUTTER: Well, some folks, they get to a certain point and want to, you know, start painting or go into theater. I mean, there are multiple expressions and political expressions.

NUSSBAUM: No. The fact is, I have a lot of skills at what I do, including the skill of operating in a very bureaucratic structure and I like to use those skills and I still feel like it's worthwhile and, I hope I'm still able to do this.

BANKS NUTTER: I'm sure. You've had a pretty impressive career doing it. And amongst that, though, these many years, is there anything you've been disappointed about, that you'd wished had gone differently, or didn't work out?

NUSSBAUM: You know, I was bummed out in the '80s. I just kind of like got done in by the '80s, and I finally shook myself out of it and part of the way I did that was that I decided that I'd become very whiny and I missed that 23-year-old who thought she could do anything, so I went out and I got myself a tattoo. I got a dragon on my heart, and a tattoo doesn't change your life, but I kind of regret having gotten whiny in the '80s but, but other than that...

BANKS NUTTER: You don't regret the tattoo?

NUSSBAUM: Oh, heavens no, no. But other than that, I feel like I've been really lucky.

BANKS NUTTER: As I said, it's pretty impressive. Is there any one thing you have accomplished in this life so far that you're most proud of?

NUSSBAUM: Ah, no, I can't actually think of something that comes to mind. I don't know. No.

BANKS NUTTER: No? well, anything else?

NUSSBAUM: Well, when I left 9to5 to come to Washington to work in the department of labor, there was a big going away party, and so a woman who was a member at a library that we had organized some years before made some remarks, and she said, how'd she put it? She said, "Karen always demanded more of me than I thought I could do but she always was right," or "but she always knew I could do it," or something like that. And I felt proud of that, that I could play a role of expecting something of Ann that she found within herself to do, and so I felt like, that's a life well lived.

BANKS NUTTER: And that was sort of, in many ways, the goal of 9to5.

NUSSBAUM: Yeah, yeah.

BANKS NUTTER: Well, that's a good note to end on. Thank you so much.

NUSSBAUM: Great. Thanks.

END TAPE 4

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