

# **Voices of Feminism Oral History Project**

Sophia Smith Collection, Smith College  
Northampton, MA

## **JUDITH BEREK**

interviewed by

KATHLEEN BANKS NUTTER

January 3–4, 2004  
Canaan, New York

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with generous support from the Ford Foundation.

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## Narrator

Judith Berek was born in Brooklyn, New York, on April 8, 1943, the daughter of Ida Kantrowitz, a bookkeeper, and Leo Berek, a machinist at Brooklyn Navy Yard, later in its employee training area. Her father also was an ESOL teacher at night. Both parents graduated from Brooklyn College as night students, as did Berek herself. Her paternal grandfather taught her to sew. Berek has one brother, Peter, three years her senior. Raised a Jewish agnostic, Berek was briefly married in her twenties and has no children. She first worked as a lab tech (1962–68) at Kingsbrook Jewish Medical Center in Brooklyn. In 1968 Berek became an organizer for District 1199, National Union of Hospital and Health Care Employees, AFL-CIO; she later served as vice-president and director of Legislative & Professional Programs, 1972–83. In 1983 Berek went to work for the State of New York Department of Social Services: until 1987 she was Director, Office of External Affairs, Special Assistant to the Commissioner on Intergovernmental Relations; from 1987 to 1991 Deputy Commissioner, Division of Adult Services, New York State DSS (both positions based in Albany). From 1991 to 1994, Berek worked for New York City Human Resources Administration as Executive Deputy Administrator for Personnel Administration. Since 1994, she has worked for the federal government in Medicare & Medicaid Services as a Senior Advisor (Washington, D.C., 1994–97), and Region II Coordinator (New York City, 1997–2002). Since 2002 Berek has been the Principal Advisor for National Policy Implementation, Office of the Administrator, Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services, based in New York. In 1986 she managed Herman Badillo's campaign for New York State Comptroller and in 1989 was director of operations for David Dinkins' mayoral campaign. Throughout the 1970s and into the early 1980s, Berek was a founding member, board member, and co-chair of the National Legislative Committee, and president of the New York City chapter of the Coalition of Labor Union Women (CLUW).

## 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 Berek's life but is especially strong on her union activities within 1199 and the founding of CLUW.

## Restrictions

None

## Format

Interview recorded on miniDV using Sony Digital Camcorder DSR-PDX10. Four 63-minute tapes.

## Transcript

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

## Bibliography and Footnote Citation Forms

### Video Recording

**Bibliography:** Berek, Judith. Interview by Kathleen Banks Nutter. Video recording, January 3–4, 2004. Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection. **Footnote:** Judith Berek, interview by Kathleen Banks Nutter, video recording, January 3, 2004, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, tape 2.

### Transcript

**Bibliography:** Berek, Judith. Interview by Kathleen Banks Nutter. Transcript of video recording, January 3–4, 2004. Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection. **Footnote:** Judith Berek, interview by Kathleen Banks Nutter, transcript of video recording, January 3, 2004, Voices of Feminism Oral History Project, Sophia Smith Collection, pp. 22–24.

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JUDY BEREK  
Canaan, New York

at: above

by: KATHLEEN BANKS NUTTER

BANKS NUTTER: Thank you again, Judy, for being here.

BEREK: Well, welcome to my house. Thank you for coming this huge distance.

BANKS NUTTER: Oh, it's not so far and more than worth it. You were great about giving me that bio statement with all kinds of great information and I wanted to start first with your childhood, first by starting with your parents. If you could just tell me a little bit about them, their values, their backgrounds, their politics?

BEREK: My parents were both born in New York City, both the oldest of four. My mother's parents were both born in Russia and my mother was raised speaking Yiddish because her mother did not speak English, which is quite common in immigrant families for an oldest child, and learned English in school.

My father's mother was actually born in the United States. She was Hungarian and she, in terms of creating a little feminism in you, she was of a very small group of women who lost their citizenship because they married foreigners, in around 1912. And the law was eventually found unconstitutional but they never restored the citizenship of the women. They had to go get naturalized. And so, my grandmother was a naturalized citizen born in Detroit, Michigan, because she had married my grandfather who was from somewhere along the Russian-Polish border.

My parents were both lefties. They were never Party members but certainly many of their friends were. There was a very strong political commitment to peace, to justice — I was raised in a very, you know, anti-violent, integration-is-the-right-thing-to-do atmosphere, which was a time when that was both radical and dangerous. My father worked for the federal government and my parents were always very nervous, but still did what they were going to do. I was on picket lines in a baby carriage. So my politics were instilled in me from a very young age. I

went on a youth march for integrated schools when I was in elementary school. I marched against strontium-90 in milk, which you are probably even too young to remember, which was basically an antinuclear testing march from the George Washington Bridge to the U.N. when I was probably 12, and Pete Seeger and the Weavers were my heroes, the same way kids now, you know, will follow, I don't know, J-Lo or somebody. So that was sort of how I was raised with a very strong bent.

My mother was a bookkeeper and was actually never in a union. My father started out in the International Association of Machinists at the Brooklyn Navy Yard. He was a machinist at the navy yard. And both my parents went to school at night. My mother's father, who interestingly, she worshipped — he died when I was about three or four, so I really didn't know him well — she worshipped him, but one of the things she talked about that I can remember my entire life, is her father saying to her when she graduated from high school, "If you were a boy I would send you to college, but you're a girl and you can go to work."

**BANKS NUTTER:** And your mother would tell you this as a way of-?

**BEREK:** My mother would tell me this — she would just tell me this. She actually — I will tell you and I loved her and miss her — she was quite sexist in terms of the way she treated me versus my brother and she had two sisters and a brother and she and both her sisters worshipped her brother because he was the boy. So it was sort of very interesting, to watch the sort of funny patterns of sexism while saying don't, you know, don't give into sexism. So I figure she balanced it enough, because I came out OK.

So that was sort of how I grew up and I was involved in politics. I was in the Girl Scouts. I was actually an extremely active Girl Scout and when I was meeting for the first time to talk about going to work for 1199, the person who was hiring me said to me, "Were you in any organization where you played a major leadership role?" And he said, "You don't have to tell us the name of the organization if you don't want to reveal it." [laugh] and I started to laugh, and I said, "Yes, the Girl Scouts of America." In some ways, it's very embarrassing, but I got into real trouble in the Girl Scouts in the '50s for carrying integration petitions, because the Girl Scouts were a segregated organization. My mother was my Girl Scout leader, and my mother hooked up with a Girl Scout leader in Bedford Stuyvesant and we would go away for weekends, Girl Scout weekends together with a black troop and a white troop which was, you know, wildly radical.

**BANKS NUTTER:** What did it feel like to be in Brooklyn in the 1950s and holding as a family unit in your neighborhood these family politics?

**BEREK:** I grew up in a neighborhood — and I wish I could remember the name of the book that was written about the neighborhood. I grew up in a

wonderful neighborhood. It was virtually entirely white and virtually entirely Jewish. But it was a neighborhood filled with people with very similar political values. And in fact, there was a big fight in our elementary school between the socialists and the communists and the PTA at one point, which is what got written up.

BANKS NUTTER: Which PS was it?

BEREK: PS 99. It's the same elementary school that Woody Allen went to.

BANKS NUTTER: Oh, really?

BEREK: He went to PS 99 and Midwood, which is the same high school, and in fact, just as a complete, stupid aside, if you ever saw the movie *Zelig*?

BANKS NUTTER: Oh, yes.

BEREK: Remember the name of the psychiatrist in *Zelig*? Eudora Fletcher, which sounds like a wild name he made up. She was the principal of our elementary school. [laugh] When I went to Brooklyn College, we were sort of — the people who were at that point — I started college in 1960 and what people refer to as the '60s were really the late '60s, early '70s. And in the early '60s, if you gave out antiwar material, which is what I was mostly doing at that point, you were ostracized. People didn't take them, they didn't talk to you, it was a very apolitical time in terms of the campus. So I was a little ahead of myself. I was a founder in Brooklyn College of something called Student Peace Union, which became SDS [Students for a Democratic Society] chapter in Brooklyn College when SDS was founded. I was already out, so, yes, and it was very weird in college but it was not — in elementary school and high school, it was not the least bit odd.

BANKS NUTTER: That's interesting. You would think that things would be the reverse. So you said something about your mom, in terms of treating you and your brother differently, when you were growing up? How did that work?

BEREK: Well, it was always boys got deferential treatment.

BANKS NUTTER: He's older than you?

BEREK: He's older than I am. He's three years older than I am. And he is, at this point, one of my very closest friends in the world, as is his wife, so it has had no, sort of, lasting problem. And, we have similar politics although, I think, politics are not as important to him as they are to me. My brother is an academic. I spent a lot of time saying to my brother, so why isn't Mount Holyoke doing things like this? [laugh]

BANKS NUTTER: So — but, he grew up in the same household? He took part in the marches, too?

BEREK: To some extent, he — my brother — left home at 17 and went to Amherst and never came home. He went from college to graduate school and got married and stayed and lived in Boston and then taught in upstate New York at Hamilton, and then moved, first to Williamstown and then Mount Holyoke and so he was not in the city and he was much more academically oriented than I was and he participated in some of the marches and stuff. He also had little kids. There was one march where the whole family went but my sister-in-law couldn't because there was a feeling that even if she could get people to baby-sit for the kids, if we all got arrested, it would be a problem, you know? It was like the whole family can't go. Somebody has to not go, because of the little kids.

BANKS NUTTER: But when you were growing up, do you now feel that you had a sense at the time that there were different expectations of the two of you?

BEREK: To some extent. To some extent. He was also very academically oriented.

BANKS NUTTER: Even as a kid?

BEREK: Even as a kid. And I was just, I mean, I didn't like school, and it just — is — it is a reality. In fact, it worked out fine. It didn't sort of damage my life, although I try very hard with young kids not to try to influence them in any way or, because it was just lucky that I managed to have what is considered a very successful career without having a focused major in college that made any sense. I majored in classics in the end, because it was easy and fun, and he was very academic, which is something they were interested in, and so, I just didn't want to do it. I can remember through high school, I wrote my book reports by mentioning the name of the book at the table, listening to my parents and brother discuss it, and then I'd write a book report without every having read the book.

BANKS NUTTER: Well, that takes a skill! [laugh]

BEREK: Well, no, I was very good at figuring out how to do it, but —

BANKS NUTTER: There's been some stuff written — actually, one of the other women involved in this project, Kate Weigand, has written on the woman issue and, specifically the Party, but the old left, and the conflicts there —

BEREK: Oh, the Communist Party was one of the worst sexist organizations in the country, and you can leave that right on the record.

BANKS NUTTER: No, it's hardly refuted by anyone. [laugh] But in growing up in that milieu, and not necessarily the Party — but that certainly, the old left and the principles that are involved, like you said, for antiwar and pro-peace and antiracist work, the gender piece —

BEREK: Was tough.

BANKS NUTTER: Yes, and it sounds like from what you said, your mother kind of embodied that conflict.

BEREK: Right, in that — in our own personal sense of — but I don't think either of my parents would have finished college at night if it weren't for my mother showing her father. I don't know if you've looked at the dates, but my mother was in labor at her graduation. So, she was, I'm going to do it.

BANKS NUTTER: And Brooklyn College is a great resource for that, for families.

BEREK: Yes, but they were very upset when I went to night school, because they weren't going to make their kids do that and then I got thrown out of day school and went back and I actually went back for one semester during the day and I hated it, because I'd been out in the world and working and I just didn't want to be with those people. The people who were in day school at that point were just not people I wanted to hang out with. I liked it better at night school.

BANKS NUTTER: I was curious — I mean, you did mention in writing that you were thrown out. May I ask why?

BEREK: I flunked. I was a science major and I did absolutely no school work. I mean zero, and I was taking physics, organic chemistry and microbiology simultaneously, and after having been told that I shouldn't do that by the school guidance counselors, a man who said to me, "And what are we going to take this semester?" I said, "I don't know what you're taking. I'll tell you I'm taking." I was just, like, please, you know, please go away and die. And, actually I think I flunked only one of them. And then I got a D in microbiology and in microbiology, I ran an A in lab and a D in lecture because I didn't read the book. I had read the book once, many years before, because I'd worked after school as a microbiologist, and I was furious because I had many friends who ran A's in lecture and D in lab and they got a grade somewhere in between, and I was really furious. And so, I went to see the teacher and I said, "If you leave me at a D, I'm going to get thrown out of school, and if you give me a C, I will not, and I deserve a C." Yes, I didn't read the book and, he said, "you read it once before, ten years ago which is why you could get a D," and he said, "And your bench skills are perfect." And I

said, “Yes.” And he said, “But your bench skills were perfect before you came into this class.” And I said, “That’s none of your business.” You know, we had this whole huge fight. And he wouldn’t change my grade. And I said, “Well, I’m going get thrown out of school.” And he looked at me and said, “Would you like a job?” and I was not very polite in the things I said to him and I walked out. First of all, I already had a job, and I knew they would let me work full-time but I was so furious, and the truth is, it was the best thing that ever happened to me.

BANKS NUTTER: Why?

BEREK: Because I went to work full-time in the hospital, and I enjoyed the work and I worked very hard. And then 1199 came in and I joined and the first contract that 1199 negotiated, if you had a bachelor’s degree, you could go from what I think was \$90 to \$105 a week. And I looked at that and I said, “I’m going to school.” Because I had finished more than half before I’d gotten thrown out — if I had gone to day school, it would have been a year and a half to go, and at night school, I did it in almost the same time. I carried twelve credits a semester and I worked, and I finished, and I majored in classics because it was fun — and the only thing, I had to take Latin, which I hated, but, it was because I got the raise.

And I think had I managed to stay in, I would have never learned anything. I would have continued the same way and managed to be just sort of smart enough to make it through. And because I got thrown out, I had to stop and think and figure out what I wanted to do with life, up to and including realizing that I had to change careers. I didn’t know what I wanted to do but I knew if I stayed in the lab, I would continue to do other people’s research. I would never be the prime author because I didn’t have anything more than a bachelor’s degree. I would never be in charge. I could just sort of see myself as a miserable lab drone for the rest of my life. And so I knew that when I finished school, that I needed to find something else to do. I didn’t know what it was, and that was sort of the place I was when the folks from 1199 said to me, “Would you like to be an organizer?”

BANKS NUTTER: I want to ask you about that but to sort of stay in the past, the more remote past a little bit. One of the things you mentioned, adults who inspired you as a child, you said your paternal grandparents, although that was a great story about the maternal one — losing citizenship.

BEREK: That was my paternal grandmother.

BANKS NUTTER: So it was her husband who taught you how to sew?

BEREK: Yes.

BANKS NUTTER: Tell me about that. I was taught by a very elderly immigrant furrier myself, how to sew. I love stories like this.

BEREK: All four of my grandparents worked in the garment industry. My mother's mother, in fact, worked at the Triangle Shirtwaist Factory, but had left because my mother was born in 1913 and so she had to stop working when — you know, before the fire, so she wasn't working there then. [NB: the Triangle Shirtwaist Fire occurred in 1911] But all of my grandparents —

BANKS NUTTER: Was she there during the “Uprising of the 20,000”?

BEREK: I don't think so.

BANKS NUTTER: 1909, 1910?

BEREK: I don't think so. I don't think she was in the country in 1909, 1910, would be my guess. I don't know the exact year. I think the only one of my grandparents in the country in 1909 would have been my father's mother, who was a little bit younger, so I don't know what she was doing at that point. But they were remarkable, my grandparents, and my grandfather — I have no idea whether if in fact somebody said to him, name your favorite grandchild, he would have named me, but as far as I was concerned, that's how I saw the relationship. And so, I wanted to learn to sew. I sort of was in rebellion. There were many people who wanted me to become a home economist and I wouldn't do it, because that was girl's work, which probably was a huge mistake in my life because I probably would have loved it. Because I loved to cook and I loved to sew. But he taught me to sew, and so I used to make my own clothes and we would spend hours and he would teach me all kinds of detail stuff. And I was the only one who wanted to learn it and it's funny, because I saw it as a career, it seemed very antifeminist to be a home economist, because I was really not a feminist as a kid. In fact, I thought the women's movement was quite elitist by my standards. But I was very much — I can do what anybody else can do. And so, being a home economist would blow that. Whereas sewing and making my own clothes or doing a lot of cooking was just doing things I liked to do, and I never put them together really.

And his wife, my grandma, when my grandfather retired, became incredibly bored, and was very upset, and because she had been born and raised in the United States, her English was quite good. She went through the eighth grade and she was clearly a brilliant woman, and a friend of my father's taught English as a Second Language in a senior citizens' center in Coney Island, which is where my grandparents lived at that point, and so my father arranged for my grandmother to volunteer since her English was good, and she began to volunteer and she joined the senior citizen club and became president of it, and then my

grandparents moved to Miami and she ultimately became president of the Golden Ring Clubs of Miami Beach, and was very involved in lobbying for Medicare. I mean, she was remarkable, just remarkable.

She was interviewed during the Democratic National Convention in Miami Beach [1972] and somebody said to her, "What's your experience?" First they said, "Are you really old?" and she said, "I'm 80. It's your call." [laugh] And then they said to her, "Well, what experience do you have in public life and public speaking?" And she said, "I had four children and you really had to yell a lot." [laugh] She was just an incredible woman. So, I mean, the two of them really, in addition to my parents, had a major influence.

BANKS NUTTER: Yes, it sounds like it.

BEREK: Now, they didn't like the communists in the ILGWU [International Ladies Garment Workers Union], so they weren't, but they were all in the union, and when I went to work for the union, my grandfather was terrified. And I said to him, "Why?" And he said, "Because they send the young people out to get beaten up. I know, I was involved in the ILGWU and they take the new young people and they send them to places where they're going to get beat up and you're the new young person and I don't want you beaten up." And I said to him, "Grandpa, they don't do that any more."

And then about three weeks later, we had a strike in New Jersey and they beat the shit out of people. And I wasn't there and so I didn't get beaten up and I thought, "Oh, my goodness, I hope my grandparents don't find this out." [laugh] You know, because it wasn't that they didn't want me to do it, they were very proud and my grandfather's sister was an 1199 member. But it was like, we don't want you to get hurt, you're ours. It's one thing to be believe in the cause and it's another to have our own granddaughter beaten up. So, you know, they all supported –

BANKS NUTTER: And amidst all this, you said you grew up a Jewish agnostic?

BEREK: Right.

BANKS NUTTER: And so what did that feel like? I mean, what piece did that play?

BEREK: Well, my parents read. You know, my father died very suddenly at 72 and since both his parents lived into their 80s, that was very young, and about six or eight months later, my mother's youngest sister died, and then my youngest aunt died, and then my 32-year-old cousin died of AIDS, all within a year. And so my mother one day said, "If there is a God, he is one vicious sonofabitch." So that's sort of how I was raised in terms of religion. My grandparents, my father's parents, the ones I liked so much, were Orthodox. They kept a kosher home, they went to

**Shul**, we went to Shul with them on holidays. It was always fun, and my grandmother's would say, "There is no God who tells you not to eat in your children's house." And so we would always get a kosher cut of meat if my grandmother was coming, if my grandparents were coming, we wouldn't put butter and milk on the table if we were serving meat. But that was her line. There is no God who tells you not to do that.

So, unlike some people who were raised by people with a lot of religion who were very judgmental, I was very lucky. You know, with that kind of attitude, it sort of puts you in a position of saying, well, I haven't got any, and for a long time, I used to fast on Yom Kippur, and I've always been overweight to varying degrees except for the rare moments after a crash diet, and at one point, I said, "What difference does it make?" It's just not eating for a day. And somebody said to me, "You know, that's very disrespectful." And I thought about it and thought about it and thought about it and said, you know, you're right. And so, I now have diabetes and I can't fast on Yom Kippur, but I don't. I mean, I stopped long before I couldn't but I observe the holidays in terms of — I never work. The only time I worked was after 9/11, and we have family things. Like Passover and Rosh Hashana and Yom Kippur, and I can cook Jewish. I can also cook Indian, Italian, French. But I can cook Jewish. I can make gefilte fish, I can make challah, I make really good tsmis.

**BANKS NUTTER:** Yes, so it sounds like it was kind of a more cultural experience and a family one and while some were more religious, your grandparents being Orthodox, it was still within your immediate family –

**BEREK:** Yes. I believe my parents would have not been observant at all, at all, were it not for Hitler.

**BANKS NUTTER:** I've heard other people say that. American Jews. (two voices)

**BEREK:** I was born in 1943, my brother was born in 1940. And I really believe that my parents were just at a point in their lives where their parents had been religious, they were not interested, but then with such, the horribly destructive anti-Semitism, that created the identification, and that's my identification. I went to the Middle East when I was in my twenties, my young twenties, and in 1967, before I went –

**BANKS NUTTER:** Oh, before or after the war?

**BEREK:** Before the war. And I wanted to go to Jordan. I wanted to go to Petra. And I wanted to go to Egypt, Lebanon, and Jordan, and applied for visas, and they asked on your visa application for your religion, and I wrote none on all of them. And I got a visa for Lebanon and I got a visa for Egypt. And Jordan asked me for a baptismal certificate, because the Wailing Wall, which I didn't care about at all, because I was not

religious, was at that point, in Jordan. You know, all of Jerusalem was in Jordan. And one of my friends said to me, "I can get you a baptismal certificate." And I said, "I'm not giving them a baptismal certificate. I'm willing to write none because the truth is, I — in a religious sense, practice none. I am not telling them I'm Catholic." [laugh] I'm just not. I'm not doing that. And, I just won't go to Petra, and I didn't.

BANKS NUTTER: Now, in growing up in Brooklyn in the '40s and '50s or even early '60s, did you experience any anti-Semitism then?

BEREK: All the neighborhood was Jewish.

BANKS NUTTER: So outside —?

BEREK: There was some anti-Semitism in the elementary school between the teachers and the kids because none of the teachers, very few teachers were Jewish.

BANKS NUTTER: Were they still Irish?

BEREK: Yes, in my elementary school. There were some Jewish teachers. Roz Chast, the cartoonist? Her mother taught in my elementary school. So there were some teachers who were Jewish but most of them were not. And there was some, you know, stuff about taking off on Jewish holidays. It was when the schools were all still open on Jewish holidays. But I didn't really notice that I was part of a huge minority group until I went to the Girl Scout encampment. I went in 1959, I went to an International Girl Scout roundup and there were religious services, and you were encouraged to go, and there were 10,000 girl scouts, and there were under 100 Jews. [laugh] and it was — that was when I noticed.

BANKS NUTTER: How did that feel?

BEREK: That was really the first time I realized that, because I grew up in Brooklyn where virtually everybody was Jewish. I guess my brother was already going to Amherst where he would bring people home who were not Jewish.

BANKS NUTTER: And he was in a world that was different.

BEREK: Right. There were three Jewish students in his class, because it was during quotas. So, it was quite — it was a remarkable experience.

BANKS NUTTER: What, 100 out of 10,000? That's one percent?

BEREK: Yes.

BANKS NUTTER: Who at least identified, anyway.

BEREK: Yes, it was, it was quite remarkable.

BANKS NUTTER: Was that the Girl Scouts piece or was there something about Judaism that didn't –

BEREK: I have no idea why there were so few Jewish Girl Scouts. I mean, in New York City, you know, I was a mariner scout, a senior scout. There was very few people who stayed in scouting past sort of the elementary school age. And so, if you sort of look at big cities, if that didn't happen in big cities, if that didn't happen in big cities, you're not going to have a lot of Jews.

BANKS NUTTER: It probably did appeal more to suburban or rural, even, as something to do. But still, what a kind of a wake-up call after living in Brooklyn.

BEREK: Yes, right, after living in Brooklyn in a neighborhood where everybody was Jewish, you know.

BANKS NUTTER: You also mentioned a high school biology teacher, and that you never liked school or planned a career — but first, tell me, you wrote that that was the start of your career?

BEREK: Well, because I worked for him after school. And so, even though it wasn't organized, he was working on his doctorate in a private research lab in Manhattan, and we didn't get paid because it had machines and so, it was very funny, we were under 16 so we could only go as volunteers, they couldn't pay us till we were 16, and we would go on weekends and work in the lab, and grow euglena, one-cell beasties and various other things like that, and you know, pipette, which is why my skills were so good in the lab. I started doing it, I was about 14 years old.

BANKS NUTTER: What drew you to that?

BEREK: It was the Sputnik age. Everybody was going to be a scientist. You know, that was what you were going to be.

BANKS NUTTER: Women, too?

BEREK: Well, there was probably not that, but, those are the areas where my parents were — “go be a scientist.” And I took an aptitude test in school — I will never forget this — when I was a freshman in high school, I took an aptitude test and when they analyzed the results, they called me in and they said, “Well, your scores say you should be an automobile mechanic or a drill press operator, which are not exactly jobs for girls

and your IQ is too high for you to be an automobile mechanic or a drill press operator. [laugh] Maybe you should be an engineer, but that's also not a good career for girls." I could take apart my sewing machine and put it back together when I was 15 years — I couldn't do it now, do not get me wrong. But when I was a kid, I could take apart the sewing machine and put it back together. I mean, I was just very mechanical and — and I think it's the same skills that I use in the kitchen, I use in the lab. Give me a recipe and I can follow it. Give me anything that has to be done in terms of small motor activity with my hands and I used to be able to do it. I could make very elaborate cookies and hors d'oeuvres.

**BANKS NUTTER:** So, the lab work — as you said, Sputnik and the public revelation that American youth were lacking, so you were getting that message in school?

**BEREK:** In school and that was, be a scientist. And again, academically oriented Jewish parents are going to encourage you to be a scientist. You could become a doctor, you could become a scientist, you know. That's the kind of thing that everybody encouraged you to — my brother, who was an English professor, started out as a scientist. He gave up science, I think, one semester into Amherst, but he started out a scientist, too. I mean, we were both going to be —

**BANKS NUTTER:** Sort of like computers were for a while, I guess —

**BEREK:** Yes, and the truth is for me, it was incredibly easy. If you think about the fact that I passed organic chemistry without reading the book. I believe I flunked physics but I passed organic chemistry without reading the book. So it clearly was something that I could do very well. I did extremely well in calculus because my friends had trouble with it and so I used to have to explain it to them so I would do my homework. And I can do that stuff, or I used to be able to do that stuff. I don't think I could do it now.

**BANKS NUTTER:** But then when you take an aptitude test — in '57, '58, there wasn't even a women's occupation?

**BEREK:** For those skills — the fact that I was so mechanically oriented, that was just —

**BANKS NUTTER:** There was no outlet?

**BEREK:** Yes, I mean, we have to do something with you — it's, like, why did you test like that? I did the family cooking from the time I was about 8 years old. I was what would now be called the latch-key child, and my father had a second job, and so I came home from school before my mother and I loved to cook and so I cooked. And my mother had to

clean up from — just sort of think about this — a 10-year-old who would go to the butcher, pick up the food — you know, we had a charge account at the butcher, I would go to the butcher, pick up the food, come home, cook, and then she had to clean. So I'm not sure how much of an advantage it really was, but —

**BANKS NUTTER:** Yes, well, it still smelled good when she came in. But you also wrote in your bio statement that at that point in your life, high school, you really didn't plan on a career and you hated school, but you still went right to Brooklyn College as a day student out of high school.

**BEREK:** Because that's what you did. I am just enough older, old enough so that the thought of not immediately going to college was destroying your life. You know, five or six years later, if somebody said, "I'm going to take a year off and think about what I want to do." Which is why I am perfectly willing to say that my microbiology teacher who I truly wanted to kill in 1962 or '63, whatever year it was, did me a huge favor. Because I then took that time off and I went back for a very mercenary reason. I loved the things I learned. I mean, I just adored it and I became an avid reader. I got what I should have been getting all along out of school, but couldn't and wouldn't because of my attitude.

**BANKS NUTTER:** Well, for returning students that's often the case, I think. So when you initially went, you were then majoring still in the sciences.

**BEREK:** I was a biology major.

**BANKS NUTTER:** You were a biology major. And you said Brooklyn College was then pretty conservative compared to your elementary and high school?

**BEREK:** High school, absolutely. My high school was across the street from Brooklyn College. It wasn't like it was physically a different world, but it was intellectually a different world in terms of the politics.

**BANKS NUTTER:** And how so?

**BEREK:** Well, most of the people I hung out with in high school didn't go to Brooklyn College. Most of the people I hung out with in high school went to other schools, went out of town. A few of my friends did, I mean, two of my friends, went from elementary — from high school with me to college with me at Brooklyn College. But all the rest of them went off to other schools, out-of-town schools. So I think that was part of why — and the two who I was friendly with were both involved in politics with me, and we were part of the core of the political left in Brooklyn College.

**BANKS NUTTER:** Tell me a little bit about that. You said you founded the student —

BEREK: Student Peace Union, which eventually became SDS and we gave out leaflets, we picketed, we marched.

BANKS NUTTER: And this was '60 to '63?

BEREK: Yes, yes. Once I came back to night school, I didn't do anything. Which is one of the reasons why when 1199 came to organize, because 1199 was the only union involved in this kind of stuff when I was involved in it and when they came to organize, it was an honor. And in fact, when they invited me to be an organizer, I said, "How can I be an organizer? I don't know how to talk to somebody who doesn't think it's an honor to join the union." So I was familiar with the union from the anti-Vietnam movement — that was the very early stages of the anti-Vietnam war movement.

BANKS NUTTER: The campus itself was, you say, conservative, but there were others besides yourself? And it was probably antinuclear as much as antiwar, too?

BEREK: You sort of look at the timing of it. It started out absolutely antinuclear, because in 1960, we didn't care about Vietnam and it progressed as Vietnam became more and more important. And I stayed doing antiwar things even when I left school and went to night school. In '67, I stormed the Pentagon.

BANKS NUTTER: Wow. Tell me about that...

BEREK: Well, I actually at one point made a very conscious decision. I had been involved in civil rights stuff and the antiwar stuff and I decided I'd better focus on antiwar stuff because if they blow the world up, nothing else matters. And that was sort of the feeling then, in terms of nuclear testing and all that. A feeling that when you look at kids today, must be 5000 times worse. But at that point, that was sort of my thinking of, you have to make sure that the world survives, and then you can do politics within it, which again was another attraction of the union, because the union wanted to do both.

BANKS NUTTER: Now, within the antiwar, or the peace movement, to put it more positively, the work that you did while in college, were there any gender pieces to that?

BEREK: Not that I remember. If the guys were sexist pigs, I truly don't remember it. But it was fun. I had a very good time. I was, you know, trying to change the world. And one of the very amusing things, is that years and years later, I was the union lobbyist and then I was the lobbyist for the New York State Department of Social Services as a

political appointee, and the woman who was then became the chair of the New York State Assembly of Social Services Committee, who is now, I think, deputy speaker, had been in the peace movement in Brooklyn with me [laugh] When we were at Brooklyn College and she's a little older than I am but not much. But people would sort of look at us and say, "How do you know each other?" Well, we used to throw bombs together in Brooklyn. We never really threw bombs, but –

BANKS NUTTER: And it was mostly the kind of work you did, like you said, picketing, leaflets.

BEREK: Leafleting, big demonstrations, yes.

BANKS NUTTER: Do you feel you made any difference on that campus?

BEREK: No, I don't think we did. When I came back at night, I was never involved in politics through the night school. So I was gone from this sort of campus atmosphere by the time we got to students being activated everywhere, at that point, I was a union official.

BANKS NUTTER: But you stayed active in the peace movement?

BEREK: Oh, yes, with my friends. I lived in a wonderful apartment house in Brooklyn. I was in a neighborhood that was overwhelmingly black and what was sort of very funny is all the private houses were owned by blacks, African Americans, whatever the term was at that point. I think you would use term, I'd use the term black. And the apartment houses, some of them were all white because of racist landlords who hadn't recognized, and some of them were integrated, and I was a rent-control tenant. I was the sort of early turnover and the rents were very cheap in this building, and I lived there, two couples who were both friends of mine lived there, and then some other people, and then there was actually a Communist Party cell in my building, which were not my friends, none of my friends were ever in the Party. By that time, I thought the Party was a right-wing sexist organization.

BANKS NUTTER: This was in the mid-late '60s?

BEREK: This was late '60s, yes, but there was this cell, and the members of the Party in my building had a Tupperware party and invited me. I was this hot recruit because I was an 1199 organizer and there was this "can we get the 1199 organizer into the Communist Party?"

BANKS NUTTER: And they used a Tupperware party?

BEREK: at a Tupperwear party (two voices).

- BANKS NUTTER: What would Earl Tupper say? [laugh]
- BEREK: It was such a wonderful thing. So I come from this really wacky building — it was a great building in a great neighborhood but it was really very fun.
- BANKS NUTTER: You could write a novel about this. I'll have that vision in my head for a long time. [laugh]
- BEREK: It really happened. I was really there. I bought Tupperware. Not a lot. I didn't make a lot of money working for the union.
- BANKS NUTTER: And I wonder what race relations were like at Brooklyn College? I'm familiar a little bit with them personally through friends and relatives in the '70s but I'm curious what it was like in the '60s.
- BEREK: It was very easy in the '60s. [laugh] It was very simple. I don't think the school was 1 percent black. I mean, it was entirely white.
- BANKS NUTTER: Had that changed at all when you came back for night school?
- BEREK: No, it was still pretty white.
- BANKS NUTTER: So it just wasn't an issue then. Was that a matter of concern for you at the time? I mean, were you aware at the time —?
- BEREK: I was aware of it. I was still peripherally involved in civil rights stuff and I was aware of it. That was at the point in my life where I sort of said, well, do I focus on this, do I focus on that? And I sort of got heavy into antiwar stuff. If you want, I will tell you my favorite story about my parents and the storming of the Pentagon.  
My parents both went to the storming of the Pentagon. I went with my friends and they went with their friends. And —
- BANKS NUTTER: And you knew they were going too?
- BEREK: Yes, and the night before, my mother called me, absolutely hysterical because there was all this stuff. I don't know if you know it or remember —
- BANKS NUTTER: I've read about it, yes.
- BEREK: All this stuff about, you know, the National Guard and bayonets and my mother was just beside herself and acting in a way that you would expect not from a mother who was going, in my opinion. And she's carrying on on the telephone about I have to be careful, I have to do this, I have to do that, and I'm going, "You're going." And I finally said to

her, "Fuck the National Guard." And there's this dead silence on the other end of the phone. And my mother goes, "I wouldn't give them the pleasure." [laugh] When my mother died, the great debate was could I tell the story at her funeral and my brother and I agreed I could do it. It was OK. It couldn't upset the rabbi too much.

And then, many years later, my brother was teaching the Telluride program for kids between the junior and senior [year] in high school at Williams, and they were teaching a class on the '60s, and the kids had just read *Armies of the Night*. My brother, who invited me to the Fourth of July picnic, and told these kids that I had been one of those people, and they looked at me and my brother could have said to them, "This is my sister. She fought with George Washington at Valley Forge." [laugh] It was very funny. I did all those things.

END TAPE 1

## TAPE 2

BANKS NUTTER: OK, well, I am going to shift now. You've made mention of 1199 and, I guess first, if you could just tell me — you left Brooklyn College in '63 or so and were working full time, and then in school at night as well. Just tell me about working in a lab in the 1960s as a young woman?

BEREK: It was — I went into it — I was interested in doing the research and the person who I worked for, worked in the same research lab I did on the weekends, and he was also working on his doctorate the same way my high school biology teacher was, and he didn't have any real research grants. And so when I wanted to work full time when I got thrown out of school, I had to work in the clinical lab, and you know, I was the low person on the totem pole, so I was the drone. But I would move as fast as I could every day, so that I could then go upstairs, they were literally on two different floors, to the little research lab, because it was the research that was fun. And I did tissue-culture research, which, at the time I was doing it, it was usually done by post-docs. It was sort of considered very avant-garde fancy research. And here I was, this dropout.

BANKS NUTTER: Was this attached to an academic setting?

BEREK: No, it wasn't an academic setting at all but we had been working on a chemical called 4-nitroquinoline-N-oxide which I can still pronounce its name and I know it's a polycyclic hydrocarbon but believe me, I remember little else about it. And we were looking at its carcinogenic effects and in the private lab, we were doing it on protozoa. We started doing it on bacterial and then on protozoa, and it could knock the ability of the euglena to make chlorophyll. We could end that with this drug. And then we wanted to see its effect on tissue culture. And that was what we were doing in the hospital lab. It was an extension of what we'd been doing in the other lab and I guess both of these guys were in doctoral programs somewhere but if — I have not a clue where. And so, it was not hooked up.

But I had to earn my keep in the microbiology lab every day and it was fine — people used to claim I was a witch because I had such good manual dexterity. I got almost no contaminations in microbiology and so that's why they would tease me about being a witch because I could manage to get no contaminations. I was also sort of really rebellious even there, everybody would call spit sputum and shit stool and I would stand there and go, you know, it looks like shit, it smells like shit, as far as I'm concerned, it's shit. [laugh] You know? And yes, I'll concentrate it so you can look for parasites, but it's shit, you know? Don't play games with me. So I was sort of the hippy. And I would go to work every day in moo moos and sandals. But it was fun.

BANKS NUTTER: You liked your work.

**BEREK:** I liked my work. It was interesting. I was in the research end of it. I would do calculations on a colorimeter and as I could calculate in my head, because at that point, I was really good in math, what the results were, and so that they could come in at the end and I would be, you know, three from the end and I would be able to say, all right, this is the curve, I can tell you. So it was fun. But it gradually was getting boring. And, that's at the point when I was sitting there, well, what do I want to do. And then 1199 came in and unionized.

**BANKS NUTTER:** It sounds like a pretty cool place to work, but the union came in at the invitation of someone?

**BEREK:** Yes. 1199 started out a pharmacists' union. And then at the instigation of a hospital pharmacist, started organizing service workers, and the commitment of the founders of the union were to organize the most downtrodden and oppressed. And they were not really interested in the technical and the professional staff in the hospitals. They were interested in the service workers. And after — I guess it was the '62 strike, they realized that they needed the professionals and the technical people because we could — I was never in a hospital on strike when the lab wasn't organized and the service workers were, but in those places where it happened, a lab technician can go sling a bedpan. And so, they needed to get the rest of the people organized. And the service staff had been organized at Kingsbrook and so they had started trying to organize the skilled workers. And so, I was in one of the very early campaigns where they began moving to organize the skilled workers in hospitals to build that strength of an industrial union.

So, my working conditions were no good. I was earning — when they came in, I think I was earning two dollars an hour. We weren't covered by the minimum wage law. I had no health insurance. But I was a kid. None of that really mattered to me particularly. I was enjoying it and I could get all the overtime I wanted. Because in addition to doing the bench work for the clinical stuff, I was doing this research stuff, and if I would come up with an extended experiment, my boss was thrilled. I could do what I wanted and so, if I saw a dress I wanted to buy, I would just run an experiment that ran on a 12-hour cycle so I had to work overtime.

**BANKS NUTTER:** So what was it that drew you to the union?

**BEREK:** The union. That's why I said when they asked me to be an organizer, I said to them, "I can't organize anybody. I don't know how you would convince someone who doesn't want to join a union to join." I had four grandparents who were in the garment workers' [union], my father had started out in the machinists', he was no longer in the machinists' union because he had changed jobs. I'd been involved in the peace movement. The union was there. I thought it was an honor. I mean, somebody came

up to me and asked me to sign a card and my attitude was, "You'll let me join?" I was very easy to organize. [laugh]

BANKS NUTTER: So, it wasn't really anything really related to your work experience?

BEREK: No, it was the right thing to do. It was the thing to do.

BANKS NUTTER: Did they easily organize Kingsbrook?

BEREK: Yes, we had what they called a card count. There was no election. It was a very easy organizing drive. Some hospitals fought, some hospitals didn't. Kingsbrook didn't fight.

BANKS NUTTER: Now, how did they come to ask you to be an organizer? You were an organizer from '68 to '72.

BEREK: Right. I was on the negotiating committee, and I am the kind of person who likes to sit in the front. I always sat in the front. First of all, in school, you sat in alphabetical order so I sat in the front, but if I went into a meeting room or something, I would sit in the front. And so, I sort of managed to get myself to be one of the people on the negotiating table for no reason. And I was just there. I guess the next to the last day of the negotiations, and the hospital people put an offer on the table and they looked at me and they said, "If you make a face again, we're going to kill you." Because apparently without my realizing it, every time they would say something, I would go "yech," I was making all these horrible faces at them and making them very miserable and they were saying, "This is a perfectly good offer and we don't want to see another face like that from you again."

And so, I was just sort of naturally very aggressively participating, almost silently, in the negotiations, and they had asked me at that point to be on the union's election board where you weren't supposed to be running for office or anything else to do with it and so I agreed to do that. And so they then said, "Do you want to be an organizer?" And I was then one of three white women lab techs who were organizers. And they all sort of said to me, this man who I loved very dearly and he brought me into the labor movement, Jesse Olsen was the guy who brought me in, said to me that, "The problem is," he said, "women are more aggressive than men but we have too many organizers already." This is an industry of women. He was a true sexist pig in his own right. Um, and you know, it would sort of piss me off but, I went on the union staff.

And what I was very nervous about was being disillusioned, because I had such faith in the union. I was afraid that if I came inside, I would find out that it really was corrupt and it wasn't. It had all kinds of weaknesses and all kinds of problems, and they didn't really do a good job of building leadership to replace them, but, the old white Jewish men who built that union did an incredible thing. And, they were quite

wonderful to work with. I kind of look back and think about how incredibly lucky I was to work with them.

I mean, when you think about it. I know you said you were going to look at Moe's book. I actually haven't read Moe's book. But I mean, Leon Davis and Moe Foner were giants in terms of visionary thinkers and creative men, and in human rights of all kinds.

**BANKS NUTTER:** There's another history, too, which you may have seen or may not — it came out in '87 — '89, I'm sorry: Leon Fink and Brian Greenberg's *Upheaval in the Quiet Zone*. And what I was struck by in reading was they address that issue of the professional and technical workers, which you pretty — you seem to agree with, that according to them, it was the union's — and I'm going to quote them — “progress on two fronts. Extending union organization to professional and technical workers and raising the standard of living of hospital employees truly represented the union's coming of age in the 1960s.” And you were a part of that (two voices)

**BEREK:** Just sort of think about being a young kid — I was not quite 25 when I went to work for the union — being not quite 25 years old, having been raised with this political commitment, and joining an organization which had about 30,000 members when I joined, and over 100,000 when I left. It was participating in a period of change that was extraordinary and the people who did that — I mean, yes, it was the time and they could do it, but, just being able to participate in it gave me the ability to do incredibly creative, wonderful things. Because they wanted to make sure they had things to hold these technical professional people because the service workers needed them, and they were trying to figure out how to do that. And in many ways, I was the person who did that. In the late '60s, early '70s, I mean, when I stopped being an organizer, my job was to build the programs that would keep the professionals interested in the union, which would make it something for them.

**BANKS NUTTER:** Now was this educational?

**BEREK:** Right. This was the educational stuff.

**BANKS NUTTER:** In the '70s and early '80s.

**BEREK:** And, I could do anything. I mean, if I came in to Leon with any kind of a half-baked idea, he would let me do it.

**BANKS NUTTER:** I guess maybe we should first talk about the organizing piece, your days — those four years as organizer. I mean, you've said that, and it's a great line, “How can I organize if they're not just in it because they love the union?” And, you know, I can empathize with that, but obviously, you did it for four years and so, maybe in retrospect, what skills besides

just girlish enthusiasm does one need to be an organizer? What did you hone?

BEREK: I think you need to be able to listen. I think you really need to be able to hear the people you're talking to, because if you can't hear them, you can't convince them. So, in an odd sense, I think the listening part of the communication is — was as important as being able to have my girlish enthusiasm for joining. I could figure out what it was people — to say wanted to hear means that — I don't mean wanted to hear in the sense of modern-day politics, where you poll and then take a position but it's to hear what the issues are that are important to the person because there are a million reasons to join a union when you think about it, and when you try to organize, you want to be able to tailor your arguments to the things that are the needs of the person you're talking to. So I would say, learning to really listen was the thing that was best. And then, learning to find leadership.

My first organizing assignment was a place in Brooklyn called Cumberland Hospital, which is now closed, and it was a City Hospital that had what's called an affiliation agreement, which meant at that point, the lab techs, the social workers, and the clerical workers all worked for a voluntary hospital, which is what we organized. And somebody had to lead, you know, some young woman who worked as a secretary was the friend of a secretary at Kingsbrook, and so I went over to meet with her and she was interested, she would talk to the other secretaries and we started talking and that night, I went back to meet with the night-shift lab people, because it was easier to get in at night, you know, there was less security so it was a good way to start.

And absolutely by accident, the first person I bumped into had been a lab tech at Maimonides, which was one of the first hospitals unionized, and this was his night job and his day job was at Maimonides and he was an active union member. And he said to me, "Give me cards" — and you sign people up on cards — "and come back tomorrow." And then he said to me, "How did you get here?" And at that point, I'd come by subway and he said, "It's not safe." The neighborhood's not safe and they walked me out of the neighborhood to the subway, which was sort of — one of the very cute things was the guys, the night guys always took care of me. They were afraid for this white girl walking through Fort Green [a section of Brooklyn]. They were probably right but it was just very nice-

BANKS NUTTER: '68, '69?

BEREK: No, this was '68. They were right. I came back the next night and he'd signed up the whole laboratory. Everybody had agreed to join. And so, it was this very, very short organizing drive where we ended up on strike in May of 1968, and the whole city-wide contract was expiring at the end of June and I was not part of the strategy and I have since learned the strategy was to make this a very tough strike, and by sort of

getting everybody very nervous, then we could get the big contract with no strike, which we in fact — it worked. But here was I, incredibly naïve, I'd been working for the union since February, and in May I was in charge of this strike.

BANKS NUTTER: How'd that feel?

BEREK: I was terrified. I mean, I was absolutely terrified. And at one point, people were being arrested and they were putting people in paddy wagons and one of the union guys walked by and said to me, "Staff people and white people, out of the wagon." So I never got arrested. So, I've never been arrested.

BANKS NUTTER: Staff people and white people?

BEREK: They didn't want — you know, the workers were all black and Hispanic. Absolutely all. No, there were three white workers. I mean, it was overwhelmingly black and Hispanic. And so they didn't want white union officials to be the people who were arrested. They wanted the workers to be arrested. Not to protect us, but the effect was better, in terms of community. And it also was the fact it's better because it's the workers, not the paid union people.

And then they sent me with a group of workers to sit-in in the Commissioner of Hospitals' office. And they filled up a car with a group of workers and we had picket signs under our coats, and we went into 125 Worth Street, which is still the headquarters, it's now the Health & Hospital Corporation or something, and I walked in and I said, "We'd like to see the Commissioner of Hospitals. Where is the office?" and they sent us. And we walked in and we walked all the way into the inner office and the secretary stood up and said, "You can't be in here. This is the Commissioner's office." And I looked at them all and said, "Take off your coats. We're in the right place."

And we had this overnight sit-in and it was just an incredible experience. And, the hospital commissioner went home. We were lying all over his office. He was appalled that — how indecorous we were behaving. We were all women, there were about eight or ten of us, and we were left with a phone that worked, and that was my first really, real contact with Moe Foner, who is a genius, and they wouldn't let us have food brought in, because we were occupying this territory and they would not let us have food. And Moe said to me, you have to pass out by the morning. Now, I was much thinner than I am now, but I was not thin. And I said, "Moe, how am I going to pass out from hunger in the morning?" He said, "I really don't care, but you have to pass out from hunger in the morning."

Then the man who was the counsel to the Department of Hospitals was so appalled that his boss wouldn't let us have food, he snuck in bags of candy for us, so we were there all night with bags of candy and come the morning, we were all lying on the floor and the couches like,

weak with hunger when the television cameras got sent in by Moe Foner. To see this group of abused women, it was like, you didn't know whether to be terrified or exhilarated. It was, like, this whole wonderful thing.

And my parents were terrified. They said they didn't care if I got arrested as long as it wasn't for soliciting. Because it would just be too hard to explain if I was arrested for soliciting and at one point, my parents came to the picket line, and I was not at the picket line, and they brought bags of candy, and I was so mortified. I mean, I am now old enough to know what a wonderful thing it was, but if you can imagine being a 25-year-old organizer and trying to make believe you were an adult and who shows up but your mother and father at the picket line. But I loved it. I mean, and it was very exciting.

I must say that in 1999, an organizer had to do both things. You had to administer contracts and be what most unions would call a business agent. And also organize. So we were all called organizers because it was a combined assignment. And I found the organizing much more fun than the business agent piece. But after four years I was tired of it. I knew I was never going to get promoted to a vice president, which was the next level up, because I was a white woman, and the other two white women lab techs had seniority over me, they had come first and they were just as good as I was. There was nowhere to go and, the same way I was, got bored working in the lab, I knew I was bored and I went to talk to Moe and Leon and I said, "I'm bored. I love the union, I love being here, I love being part of this, but if I have to keep doing this in this setting, I'm bored. You have to give me something else to do." And they said, "Fine." And they made me the director of legislative and professional programs and said, "Now, make up legislative and professional programs." You know. "That's your job. Do it." And we had just started forming committees of staff by profession — and we had a committee of lab techs, we had a committee of social workers, X-ray, nurses, so we had just started pharmacists — forming those groups, and so I began doing that full-time.

And then, the union had never had a lobbyist. When they passed the bill for the right to organize, Moe went up to Albany and worked on it but he never really full time did that. And so they sent me to Albany and they sent me to Albany by giving me the name of somebody and telling me where he hung out and to go meet him and he would help me, and I should figure out how to be the union's lobbyist. I mean, this was sink or swim in the most — and so that's what I did.

**BANKS NUTTER:** And that you did throughout the '70s?

**BEREK:** I started that in '72 and I basically did that until I left, the combination, and it um, it grew and developed and changed quite dramatically over the years, but it was basically the same activity. When I went to Albany, it was my first year, which was — 1972 was when Karen Burstein and Carol Bellamy were elected to the state legislature for the first time and

a lot of other people, and we formed the women's lobby. And that was again, in keeping with the principles of the union, the union was pro-choice, the union was pro-ERA, the union was pro- all these things. And so I could work on those issues. And I was able to, by working on other issues that the union supported but wasn't a day-to-day hospital worker issue, it helped me build all kinds of coalitions so that when the hospital workers had problems, I could get other people to help. That's really, if I sort of look at my career in terms of what is the thing I can do best in the world, it's sort of put together coalitions and get them to work.

**BANKS NUTTER:** It's a good skill. There are a couple of other quotes, actually, from the Leon Fink and Brian Greenberg history, *Upheaval in the Quiet Zone*, that I wanted to read to you and get your response, and they really do emphasize the very direct connection between 1199 and the civil rights movement in the '60s and they write, and I'm quoting, "By the late '60s, enthusiasts within local 1199 believed that the effective joining of union power and soul power would generate a new wave of labor organizing among the nation's poor and unskilled inner-city population." I guess my first question is, do you agree?

**BEREK:** Absolutely.

**BANKS NUTTER:** How did that feel? I mean, as an organizer and even in your programming phase in the '70s when — you know, how did that work?

**BEREK:** We were part of it all. I mean, if there was a civil rights action, we were part of it. If there was an antiwar action, we were part of it, and so it was a wonderful feeling. I guess '69 was the Charleston Hospital strike. It was exhilarating to be able to help and work on something like that where you were dealing with a segregated hospital with a segregated workforce and as oppressed as we were in New York City, this was whole worlds different, and it was just wonderful to go down and participate with Coretta Scott King — Martin had already been killed — and Andrew Young. You know, Andy Young was staff to 1199 during the Charleston Hospital strike. They [the Southern Christian Leadership Conference] lent him to the union. Just to have been involved with that was — that's what I said. It was an honor for me.

**BANKS NUTTER:** Now as a college-educated white woman, though, how did you connect with the people you were trying to organize?

**BEREK:** One, most of my day-to-day organizing was on the technical staff. I sort of became the expert in organizing social workers and lab techs and that. And so, I did more of that. I think I was so enthusiastic, it didn't really matter a whole lot. I had respect for the people who were doing the work, you know, the in-theory scut work. I understood its value, and so I don't think it was a huge issue. And the union, although it ultimately got into trouble, in terms of building new leadership, the

union itself was willing to talk about the issues. You look at them saying, all the workers are black and Hispanic. We're not going to have three white union staff people get arrested with these workers. It's not a good idea. People were not afraid to talk about the issues, and it was part of finding things in the union to keep all groups interested. And so, it was a wonderful thing to be part of. And again, it was something I believed in — it was just ingrained in me, so.

**BANKS NUTTER:** Reading that history and Foner's stuff, too, it seems almost idyllic in that way. Well, you've reaffirmed my faith in that piece because when you read that, because that's kind of an official history, I think, the Leon Fink and Greenberg one and then, of course Moe Foner's take on it. It just sounds like I said, in terms of race relations, idealized. And the consciousness around race in the union. And, but at the same time, what struck me as a women's labor historian was those authors, Fink and Greenberg, say very little about gender. They do say, and this again is a direct quote, "While rarely voiced as a issue by the members, gender and equality, particularly the heavily male majority among the union staff and exclusively male coterie and policy making circles, set up a difficult path, both for aspiring women leaders and those who sought to integrate them into the decision-making process." Yet you went on and took that difficult path for a little while. I'm just curious what your response is to that?

**BEREK:** Moe Foner, Leon Davis, and Jesse Olsen — Jesse's the guy who hired me — all white men, two pharmacists and Moe's just whatever Moe — a genius — all lived in Queens. And the three of them used to go back and forth from work together. And there is no question that in that car, going back and forth to Queens, major direction was set. And whatever the official circles of discussion were, that little tiny in-car caucus had played a very significant role in the decision-making of the union. And there were lots of people who were made crazy by that, who were, you know, "they won't let me in."

And Doris Turner, who succeeded Leon as his hand-picked choice for president, was one of those people. And I will tell you that I said to Moe and I am not a seer, but many times I said to Moe, "I don't think she feels about or believes in the same things we do." And he and Leon, because they wanted to believe it, kept saying, "she'll be fine and Jesse will be around to help her." Well, she hated Jesse, and Jesse, and maybe this will make me say, leave it in the archives for a long time but I don't think so — Jesse was a sexist. He didn't mean to be. He just was, and it was how he was raised, where he was raised, when he was raised. If he could say to me, "I don't know why I'm hiring you, I already have two girls from the lab and even though you're all good, why should I really hire a third?" It's sort of open but stupid to say to me. I came anyway, but —

**BANKS NUTTER:** That was in 1968.

BEREK: Right.

BANKS NUTTER: You wouldn't have been so shocked. You may not have liked hearing it —

BEREK: But I heard it, and so there was some of that problem. I had a wonderful time with Leon. Leon could be very gruff, he could be very hard to deal with, but I would argue with him, and I think it's partly because I come from a family where people argue with each other. I don't say fighting, I say arguing. We would argue issues. We would talk about them. We would debate them and it wasn't something that was hard for me to do, and in fact, I had a lot of trouble with Doris when she became president when she would say to me, "You wouldn't speak to Leon like that." And I said, "I spoke to Leon like this all the time, lady," you know. "Leave me alone. I'm not talking to you any differently from the way I talked to him." Um, and so, I got along with him very well, and I worshipped Moe. I just adored him. By the time he died, both of my parents had died, and when he died, it was really like the end.

BANKS NUTTER: He engendered that from a lot of people.

BEREK: Yes, so, it was wonderful to work for them. You had their work — they had weaknesses, but — and I will tell you, as you came in you met Emma Stellman, who is Jeanne's daughter. Well, we formed this lab committee and we were talking, and in the talking, it became very clear that in a couple of hospitals, there were what looked like mini-epidemics among lab staff of hepatitis. And we talked about it and we tried to figure what to do, and we did it sort of through gossip and we didn't know, and this was in fact — we'd already formed New York Trade Union Women, and I talked to some people from other unions and they mentioned to me there that there was this woman who had set up the Occupational Health and Safety Program for the Oil, Chemical and Atomic Workers and was moving back east from Colorado to New York and maybe I could call her and that's Emma's mother. And we needed a scientist to help us. And I called Jeanne, and Emma's older brother was less than a year old, and he slept on Leon Davis's conference table. And we talked to Jean about how to do this to figure it out.

And I, having been a microbiologist, was appalled at the way people who did blood chemistry and other tests were handling the blood. Because as a microbiologist, you weren't really protecting yourself, you were protecting your specimens. And so you didn't get contaminated because you worked aseptically. But all these other people were handling the same specimens in ways where they did get contaminated.

And so we started talking to Jeanne and Arlene Ezratty, who was one of the other white lab techs and I went in to Leon, and we said, you know, "We've identified this problem and we think we need to do some

occupational safety and health work in hospitals.” And Leon said to us, “Hospitals have to be safe places. It’s where sick people go. If there were problems, doctors would know it.” And I’m getting ready to start yelling at him, and he said, “But you can do anything you please. You want to try it, try it. And if you come back and you’re right and I’m wrong, fine.”

And we sat down with Jeanne and we did this first study, and we found horrible hepatitis epidemics among hospital workers that were completely preventable, by gloves, training, and these were landmark studies. They were the first studies like this ever done. And he then backed us 100 percent. At this point, he was a man in his mid-seventies.

BANKS NUTTER: He stuck in there for quite while.

BEREK: Set in his ways — but, “You prove to me it’s bad for workers, OK. Otherwise, shut up and go away,” basically. And I proved it.

BANKS NUTTER: And that wasn’t gender specific for him.

BEREK: No, in fact, the truth was, it was easier for me to fight with him than it would it would be for a guy. I mean, that’s the truth.

BANKS NUTTER: So that line, the difficult path that historians Fink and Greenberg identified for a woman to try to get into the leadership, you were saying it wasn’t so difficult?

BEREK: I think — well, I built a different kind of relationship. I was, for Moe, I became a third daughter. And that was OK with me in terms of a role. Doris Turner couldn’t build that role.

BANKS NUTTER: Because of her race?

BEREK: Because of her attitude — she didn’t want that role. And in fact, they sort of thought of her that way, which she thought of as paternalistic. And in a sense, she was right. My attitude was, I just want to get this stuff done, you know? You let me, you let me do it, you let me be creative, you let me — I’m happy. As long as I don’t have to do the same thing every day for the rest of my life, and I can feel that what I’m doing will make a difference in people’s lives, you know? I was just happy to be there. I mean, I would have never left if she weren’t corrupt.

BANKS NUTTER: That was why you left? I wondered. And we can wrap up with that. Just to finish up on that part there. So you felt supported by Leon Davis and Moe Foner and the male cadre?

BEREK: Oh, absolutely, absolutely.

BANKS NUTTER: Did you feel respected by them?

BEREK: I felt supported, I felt respected. Moe was very helpful in our forming CLUW, or in the initial New York Trade Union Women, he was extremely helpful in that in terms of giving advice, giving support. He was extremely helpful in saying things like, “Be careful. If you form an organization, it will exist forever.”

BANKS NUTTER: It’s like having a child.

BEREK: That’s right. You got to think through what you’re doing and where you’re going.

BANKS NUTTER: He was one of the big mentors in your life.

BEREK: Oh, absolutely, when he built Bread & Roses, if you’ve read his book — I did the Bread for the beginning of Bread & Roses, and all he would say to me is, “We shouldn’t ask for money for things because people want to give money for it. They have to be things we want to do.” You know, don’t apply for a grant just because the grant money’s there. You just have to make sure that it’s something you really want to do; otherwise, you’re going get the money and you’re not going to want to do it. And so, he was very, incredibly supportive of me being creative and doing things. And I think — again, it’s because I found the paternalism nice. I didn’t mind it, but I think that’s difference because I was a white Jewish woman who didn’t object to that. Not because I was astounding but because it culturally was perfectly comfortable. And I can understand why Doris hated the paternalism. I think she was a monster but I think they helped create it, and Moe knew that. I think Leon never really did, it was too devastating for him.

BANKS NUTTER: It was during this period in the ’70s when 1199 grew, as you said, by the thousands, the membership did, but at the same time, it was the shifting at the leadership level, at the very top, and so by the early eighties, ’82, I guess, the dust seemingly had settled.

BEREK: Right.

BANKS NUTTER: Doris Turner?

BEREK: And she was hand picked by them.

BANKS NUTTER: By Leon Davis.

BEREK: By Leon Davis. She was hand picked by him. And for an assortment of reasons, we had a very hard time, Doris and I.

BANKS NUTTER: Between the two of you.

**BEREK:** Between the two of us. One, I think I was probably, in her mind, Leon in drag [laugh], which to me would be an honor, but, you know, I was a feminist at that point, which I did not come into the labor movement as, but I had sort of grown into it, and she was not. I mean, she was not pro-choice, she had some of the hesitations that many African American women had of thinking that African American women were doing better than African American men, and therefore the women's movement was hurting African American men, and of course the statistics don't show that, but there was that feeling. And so she was not a feminist and I was all of those things, and I was outspoken, so we did not get along very well, and if you've read Moe's book, you know she tried to scratch my eyes out at a meeting, and that was the point at which — and I will tell you and it hurts me to say this, but I will say it for the record. I did not leave because Doris tried to scratch my eyes out. I left because it was Doris's supporters who ripped her off me, and not the people on my side, who didn't have the courage to stand up from their seats. That is why.

You know, when I sort of thought it through in the end, and decided I was going to go, the real reason was that I did not have day-to-day contact with the members anymore. I did politics. I did all of these committees. I was better known union-wide than anybody other than the president because I did politics, but I didn't go out day to day in hospitals to talk to workers. And so I wasn't in a position, if there was going to be a struggle, to really do what I thought had to be done for this struggle, and I looked at the people who had to be doing the struggle and it was, like, you guys are scared to death, you know?

And it was over a vote, it was over some very stupid thing. I think — she tried to scratch my eyes out because I made a motion to make a going away party for the treasurer of the union who was retiring who she hated. That was what I did. She said, "You can't make a motion." And I said, "I'll make any motion I fucking well please" — which nobody heard but her, because I used to — as the person who did the political contributions, I always sat at the head of the table next to, sort of, at the elbow of the president when it was Leon, I did it when it was her, I did it because so much of the meeting was flipping through all these invitations of what should we give to, and so I always did that and so I was right there, and I did actually curse at her which was not a reason to try to scratch my eyes out, but that was a hard time in that struggle and I decided —

And then, I tried to get the union to endorse Mario Cuomo when she was supporting Ed Koch. And we ended up with a tie vote. And I think that's pretty good, actually, going against the president to get a tie vote.

**BANKS NUTTER:** That must have endeared you to her, too.

**BEREK:** Well [laugh], but that was the point at which I decided that I couldn't stay. We had a strike going in Denny Farrell's district. Denny is, was then and still is, I guess, Manhattan party leader for the Democratic

Party, and he was an assemblyman. And she wanted him to do something, I don't remember what it was, and she said to me, "Now you go and tell him that we made a campaign contribution for him and he has to do this." And I looked at her and I said, "Let me tell you two things. One: that's illegal and I'm not going to do it. And number two: you bought two tickets to a dinner for \$200. The man is the party leader for Manhattan. If you want to buy party leaders, you better look at higher prices." And I walked out of her office, and I knew I couldn't be the public face of that. If that was the sort of the attitude of the president of the union, I had to move on.

**BANKS NUTTER:** Still, it must have been hard, given your love of 1199 as it had been when you first came in 15 years earlier.

**BEREK:** Oh, and I went to work for the state and I was in Social Services, which controlled the Medicaid money, and she precipitated this really ugly horrible strike that made absolutely no sense and I don't even remember what it was. One of the hospital finance people called me and wanted me to do something, maybe help them get a cash advance or something that would have really stuck it to the workers, because they couldn't get their billing in and stuff, because there were no workers, and occupancy was down, and he called me and he asked me this, and I just sat there, absolutely appalled, and I said to him, "I may not like Doris Turner but if you think I'm going to do a single thing to stick it to the workers, you're calling the wrong person. I mean, get a grip." [laugh] You know, I wasn't there as a paid hatchet person. That was my union.

So then when Moe controlled Bread & Roses throughout this whole thing, and I was on the board of Bread & Roses, so I stayed with a little bit of a tie.

**BANKS NUTTER:** Well, tomorrow, we can talk about CLUW, and probably hear more about the union piece through that. But we'll end today for now.

END TAPE 2

## TAPE 3

BANKS NUTTER: We are now back at Judy Berek's house. It's Sunday, January 4, 2004, and we're going to continue our conversation. We ended yesterday with your time as a District 1199 organizer and vice-president, and your departure there. And actually, I should have handed you these before but I went to Tamiment Library [at New York University] and looked at Connie Kopelov's papers in which there's quite a bit about the founding of CLUW and the first New York Women's Trade Union Conference. And I have from there the brochure that you did as the co-chair [laugh]. It's been a while since you've seen that, probably, huh? And that was January 1974, you were the co-chair of the first New York Women's Trade Union Conference. And there's also this press account from the *Labor Chronicle* which in the photo, you're off to the side of the podium in the upper corner.

BEREK: Oh, I used to love Farrah's [clothing manufacturer] picket lines.

BANKS NUTTER: Yes. [laugh] Well, sort of going from that, tell me about that conference. How it came to being. You were with District 1199 then in your role as Vice President and Director of Legislative and Professional Programs.

BEREK: Barbara Wertheimer and Ann Nelson at Cornell had formed a brown-bag lunch group — I don't know how long it had been meeting, but I was one of two or three 1199 women who went to it, and it started out sort of like our lab committees, you know, where we just talked about what was going on. And many of the women were rank-and-filers in the union, some of them were staff, a few of them were officers, and we began sort of talking about putting something together and we decided to do this conference and — yesterday, when I talked about how helpful Moe was, you know, you want to put together a conference, you go and have strategy sessions with Moe. I would go and have strategy sessions with Moe and then I could come to the meeting and be smarter than everybody else because I had Moe, who I eventually had to share.

But 1199 was happy to host it and we had this great auditorium and we assumed we'd have a small meeting. I mean, it was sort of like the founding convention of CLUW. We assumed it would be a small meeting and we had this incredible overflow crowd of people who just came, and there were leaflets and there were announcements in union papers, but there was nothing organized. It was the organizing thing and it was incredibly rewarding to realize that all these women really wanted you to do this, and they really wanted to do this. And it predated the founding of CLUW by very little-

BANKS NUTTER: A couple of months?

BEREK: Right. It meant we had a CLUW chapter when CLUW was founded. New York was set because we had done this before and so we had the

underpinnings of it. But it just was a lot of women — unions, including my own, were really not sensitive to what we all think of as women's issues. We were in the political scene but we didn't bargain for daycare, we didn't focus on those issues, and we did focus on training and upgrading, which is crucial for women who come in to low-pay, dead-end jobs to get out of them, but we didn't look at daycare particularly. And this sort of brought that out.

And it also gave women a place to come to talk in a kind of safe environment about how to deal with the sexism in the unions. If you were sort of pro-union, you didn't want to go to people who didn't like unions about the sexism in your union, because you didn't want them to use it against you. But it sort of gave us a place where we could not just share with each other what the issues were but strategize with each other and help each other deal with problems and issues.

I mentioned yesterday I didn't mind Leon Davis and Moe Foner being paternalistic because that's how I felt about them. But there are plenty of people, who if they acted paternalistic to me, I would have minded. And there were people who you minded with them, as we talked about. And it's really not OK if you do mind.

And so there was a lot of sharing and a lot of sort of the ability to — give people the ability to step forward and grow and to create a pressure. I mean, you know, the guys, it made them nervous.

**BANKS NUTTER:** Now who was it who came to this first New York Women's Trade Union meeting?

**BEREK:** Mostly rank-and-file members of unions. I mean, lots of people from 1199. Lots of people from the store workers, public employees from District Council 37, people from the Newspaper Guild. Lots of needle trades — at that point, there were two separate unions [the ILGWU and the Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union], and there were a lot of people. In fact, one woman was from my grandfather's old local, which I sort of liked. But a lot of people from the needle trades. And I remember one woman who was a taxi driver, she was very unhappy.

**BANKS NUTTER:** I can imagine. Now, in terms of race and age, was there diversity?

**BEREK:** Very mixed, both, the race was very mixed and the age was mixed. It was really — especially from up at the stage, you just sort of stood there looking out, going, "Oh, my God."

**BANKS NUTTER:** Now how many people do you think were there?

**BEREK:** The auditorium seats — I used to know all this by heart but I think it seats about 500 and it was a standing-room-only crowd.

**BANKS NUTTER:** And you had expected maybe a couple hundred?

- BEREK: Yes, 300 people. You know, it's like, if 300 people came, we were terrific. [laugh]
- BANKS NUTTER: So you must have been overwhelmed.
- BEREK: And then you suddenly go, huh? So that part was just incredible. For me — and I talked about this yesterday, how wonderful it felt to be part of the growth of the 1199. It was the same kind of thing, you know, you're part of an organization, the founding of an organization that people feel a need for.
- BANKS NUTTER: Now, you came out of this in January, and at that point, was the meeting that would become CLUW in March, was that already set? Were you already looking towards that?
- BEREK: Yes. I was not involved in setting up that March meeting. There were a few people from New York, I think probably Connie and maybe Barbara Wertheimer, but I was not involved. But that was already in the works, and there was discussion about doing it, and then the meeting in March was the same thing. They called this meeting and it was in Chicago, so people had to travel, and there were 3000 women.
- BANKS NUTTER: And you were there?
- BEREK: I was there. And that — that was extraordinary. And there's a film on CLUW, I don't know if you've seen it?
- BANKS NUTTER: No, heard of it, yes.
- BEREK: Oh, you should see it. But the best — the best line in the film, the very best line, was from Myra Wolfgang —
- BANKS NUTTER: Yes, I've read that quote.
- BEREK: "Swapping recipes" — and it was extraordinary. It was just extraordinary. And I got to know Myra and then Myra's daughter is one of my closest friends, which is entirely because she's Myra's daughter. She moved to New York and I tracked her down and became her friend. And Myra didn't cook at all. You know, there was no way. She was in the Hotel and Restaurant union but there was no way Myra would be swapping recipes. But it was just wonderful and it was inspiring. It was just inspiring.
- BANKS NUTTER: I have another photocopy from the March 30, 1974, issue of the *Nation* in which you're quoted.
- BEREK: Oh, my God. See if I remember that.

**BANKS NUTTER:** Yes, and, if in a good liberal way, one does nothing else than to be quoted in the *Nation*, favorably, of course. Your quote is here. It's talking about this March 1974 meeting that becomes CLUW, and you're quoted as "'We're doing this from the inside,' Judy Berek explained. 'No male trade unionist should think that this meeting or the ongoing organization that will come from it is directed at him. All of us here are committed to the labor movement.'" And there's a clip from the Louisville, Kentucky, paper, I'm not quite sure why, and then the *Nation*. That was how they have it in the archives there, again at Tamiment.

**BEREK:** Wow. The founding of CLUW and the convention was an interesting experience for a lot of reasons. Because that, again, was very mixed age, and a huge amount of conflict based on age, because the older women were women who had really stuck it out despite everything, like Myra and Olga Madar, and who were very much a part of the system, and the younger women were mostly rank and file, women came and talked about union meetings with strippers and just women who worked in industrial plants where there were there were 3 women and 250 men and, just absolutely horrendous conditions, and the fact that they had a commitment to the labor movement was a tribute to them, because the labor movement wasn't really very nice to them. And there were a few of us who were either officers or high ranking staff in unions who sort of met the job descriptions of the older women but who were the age of the younger women, and there was a lot of tension between the two groups, and there wasn't a whole lot of acceptance of the middle group.

And the bridge between the older women and the middle group, like me and Linda Tarr-Whalen and, and Nancy Pearlman, and Myra — who knew Moe from the antiwar movement — Myra was one of those antiwar people and so, there was an instant acceptance between Myra and me and Myra sort of was sympathetic to the politics of the younger women, even though she was one of the older women, and that was sort of how we were able to get these 3000 people who were so incredibly diverse, not just in terms of race and age and sex, but what the labor movement meant to them, where we were in it together by sort of finding the people who crossed each barrier and bringing us together. But Myra was a real bridge in that and was quite wonderful.

**BANKS NUTTER:** Now, who then was the bridge, say, between the middle group that you say you were part of and the younger group?

**BEREK:** Well, a couple of us who had pretty good radical credentials.

**BANKS NUTTER:** That was a key?

**BEREK:** That was sort of a key. You know, we had good radical credentials. Someone like Connie who was a little older but who was really a strong feminist and I think I've said to you, I was not. I did not start out in this

thing saying I was a feminist. I was a trade unionist. And so that was sort of how the pieces got put together. You just sort of found people who could talk to people.

BANKS NUTTER: The histories — there was the Diane Balzar's book, *Sisterhood and Solidarity: Feminism and Labor in Modern Times*. It came out in 1987 and her last chapter actually is about the founding of CLUW and up to the mid-'80s. And then there's a fairly recent dissertation by Silke Roth that's actually just come out as a book, although it's only a library monograph, it's pretty expensive. I got a hold of the dissertation version of it, and they both talk about some of these controversies, and Balzar in particular writes about the Teamsters versus the United Farm Workers controversy at that founding meeting of CLUW, and I was curious to hear about your remembrance of this?

BEREK: Until you said, I completely forgot — you know, it was like it was gone in the past but, I come from the sort of Farm Workers side of it and you know, it was learning to recognize, we were all women trade unionists and in fact, at the time, the Teamsters had some pretty good union women's programs. You just couldn't go, Teamsters, truck drivers, they don't care about women, you know. And I didn't know this till I got there, but there was some articulate women from the Teamsters who had clearly been involved in really good program and stuff. And so you couldn't just throw them away and of course, and Myra had a terrific relationship with the Teamsters. I mean, I hear about that from Martha [Myra Wolfgang's daughter] all the time, because, you know, when Myra would stage a restaurant strike, Jimmy Hoffa wouldn't deliver, so — because it was the Detroit restaurant workers that she represented. And so, we found common ground. But it was easy. I don't, at this point, remember all the little conflicts, but boy, it was —

BANKS NUTTER: Sort of for the record, what's your memory of that dispute?

BEREK: It's not good enough — so long ago.

BANKS NUTTER: In the end, and that's the clip I've seen from that movie, everybody is holding hands and singing at the end, but it was another more than a — two decades before Dolores Huerta would be on the executive board of CLUW, so while it may have been resolved seemingly, I guess it rankled for a while with some.

BEREK: Well, I also suspect that to some extent, it was a long time before it was worth Dolores's time to be on the executive board of CLUW as well. I mean, at that point in the labor movement, their organizing was so basic and so critical.

BANKS NUTTER: To the farm workers?

- BEREK: The farm workers. You have to be a fairly mature union for your officers to have the time to do anything but manage your own growth. I'm not saying that the Teamsters were nice to the Farm Workers but I'm just saying —
- BANKS NUTTER: Yes, that's a good point. Certainly, the United Farm Workers were in survival mode.
- BEREK: She's one of the most extraordinary trade unionists in the country.
- BANKS NUTTER: Yes, I'm hoping to talk to her, too. She's a busy woman.
- BEREK: We sat next to each other at Moe's funeral. We sat in the order we were speaking, and so we ended up sitting next to each other and — this is a complete diversion and slightly embarrassing but really quite wonderful. Harry Belafonte was up there talking and Dolores Huerta and I were sitting next to each other and both of us keep mumbling, "Oh, my God is he beautiful." [laugh] And then we just sort of looked at each other and we go, "Here we are, longstanding old lady feminists drooling over Harry Belafonte." But, you know, he is beautiful.
- BANKS NUTTER: Yes, he's aged well. Now, there were other controversies from my readings of both this recent dissertation by Roth and Diane Balzar's book, and one of them was the discussion around restriction of membership to trade union women only. And that, it seems like, was one of the issues that fell along the age or politic break. Do you remember anything about that?
- BEREK: Well, it fell in the age and politic break because there were a lot of people trying to organize who thought being in CLUW would help them organize. And the sort of old guard was afraid of those people, and while in principle, I can say, well, if this is a group of trade union women, you have to be in a trade union. But the other issue is, if you're really trying to build a labor movement, maybe this will help. And so, it was very tough, and some of the people pushing that issue were kind of doctrinaire political types, which made it harder.
- BANKS NUTTER: How'd you feel about it?
- BEREK: I could take either side on that one.
- BANKS NUTTER: As an organizer?
- BEREK: As an organizer, maybe it would really help to be able to bring in partly organized women but the labor movement is what it is, which is you have to join to be in. And so you can argue either way, and it makes the organization harder to control, if you have people who are out of the labor movement in it. And I think that was a lot of the fear.

BANKS NUTTER: Also, the role of men in the organization, initially, was discussed.

BEREK: We had some men at first –

BANKS NUTTER: I guess that there was maybe some who didn't think that there should be any. One of the histories, the account is usually that CLUW was part of the reason why the AFL-CIO, or at least major portions of it, came to support the ERA.

BEREK: Oh, I think CLUW scared the old boys' network. And that is not a bad thing. And I think it's absolutely true, that had it not been for the founding of CLUW, the AFL-CIO would not have supported the ERA. ERA — they would have never been any of the stuff that's now going on, little as it may be with the development of daycare within unions or, and lots of other family friendly workplaces. I mean, all of that kind of stuff is stuff that even though it in many ways impacts men as much as women surfaced because of this organizing, and as long as the organizing of women was external to the labor movement, those guys didn't care. Once it became internal, they had to care.

BANKS NUTTER: Now you said today and yesterday, that you didn't come to the labor movement a feminist.

BEREK: Right.

BANKS NUTTER: Can you talk a little bit about, you know, how you became a feminist — what the process was for you? In this time period?

BEREK: No, I think it was more change in the attitude of the women's movement than a change in me. When I was an organizer, sort of organizing new workers and administering contract, there was the first women's strike and the slogan was, "Don't iron while the strike is hot" and I got asked whether I was going support it and I said, "Not on your life." I said, "I represent hospital workers. You know, those women iron for a living, you know?" They're downstairs — it was when hospitals still had laundries. They're downstairs in the basement using mangles. You're talking about middle-class women who are at home ironing their husband's shirts. You are not relevant to us. And that was sort of the basis of my attitude. It was, like, you are not relevant to us. And as people became relevant, as the movement became relevant, and I think a lot of it, I daresay I will give credit to Barbara Shack. Do you know Barbara Shack?

BANKS NUTTER: No.

BEREK: She worked for the New York Civil Liberties Union, and she was one of their lobbyists in Albany on women's issues. And she was really a

founder of the Women's Lobby in New York, and she built the agenda. And there were lots of women's issues, very important to trade union women, like maternity disability. You know, that was a crucial issue. I mean, 1199 treated pregnancy like any other disability. We were a self-insured health plan and we did it. But nobody else did. 1199 paid for abortions the day abortions became legal. But they built their agenda in a way that it was relevant to everybody and so that sort of brought me into what was a piece of the women's movement. So I think it was as much a maturing of the women's movement to recognize the interests of working-class women as it was a change in me.

BANKS NUTTER: And the creation of CLUW was perhaps a broader recognition of that?

BEREK: Right. And CLUW was embraced by the rest of the women's movement.

BANKS NUTTER: What, in the years that you were a part of CLUW, which was up to 1983, was your perception of CLUW's relationship to the AFL-CIO or beyond 1199 which you said was supportive, what about the rest of organized labor?

BEREK: It was very mixed. It was very mixed, and I was always very conflicted because there were sort of three possibilities: this sort of fabulous cooperative relationship between the AFL-CIO and CLUW, the life fantasy; the hostile relationship between the AFL-CIO, which would be very difficult to manage; and the co-opting of CLUW by the AFL-CIO, which is where it ended up. And how do you create the perfect, which I don't think we ever really did, because I think we switched. You know, it started out a little hostile, it then got cooperative and it got very quickly co-opted. So that CLUW really became a less independent organization, and by the time that was happening, I was sort of leaving, but I think it really did happen. But in the beginning, I don't think they liked us. But then again, I was from a union the AFL-CIO didn't like anyway, [laugh] so, it was, you know, we were communists and it was still in the days of red-baiting, which had stopped everywhere else in the country pretty much, but it was, you know, George Meany and Lane Kirkland, who still didn't like communists. And so, I was sort of from that piece of the AFL-CIO anyway so my expectations were quite different than somebody who was sort of part of the network and Olga, who was the first president, was from the [United] Auto Workers, which was at that point [was] out of the AFL-CIO. So, I think one of the reasons they, that people supported Joyce [Miller] to succeed Olga was that it would bring us into having a president within the AFL-CIO, it would get us in a position of demanding a seat on the executive board, which we got. And that's the sort of balance between now, when, how co-opted do you get, you know?

BANKS NUTTER: The gradations of co-optation?

- BEREK: Right. How inside do you really want to be? And so I think there was always a tension. You know, you want them to listen to you but you don't want to be nervous about disobeying them.
- BANKS NUTTER: Well, there's this Silke Roth dissertation that's now in book form. She's more a sociologist, I guess, and stresses the insider-outsider theory, and she writes, and this is a quote, "In contrast to autonomous organizations like 9to5 or Union Wage, CLUW set out to work within the unions rather than criticizing the labor movement from the position of outsider. The leaders of CLUW thus chose accountability towards the labor movement over accountability to the women's movement." What would be your response?
- BEREK: That wasn't how it started but that was how it ended.
- BANKS NUTTER: Ended by the '80s?
- BEREK: Yes, oh yes. I was still in there when, in my opinion, it was very much inside the labor movement.
- BANKS NUTTER: Yet you said that from the beginning, the women's movement embraced CLUW in a way.
- BEREK: Right, and was helpful and supportive.
- BANKS NUTTER: She goes on to say, though, she calls CLUW a bridging organization, saying that, "Using insider tactics, CLUW introduced outside issues like child care, reproductive rights, sexual harassment and pay equity onto the labor agenda." Does that sound accurate?
- BEREK: Oh, yes, and there's value. You know, getting the first woman on the AFL-CIO executive board is an enormous accomplishment, and there was a huge change. I have all these funny stories I'm trying to figure out what I want to tell you. Only half may fit in –
- BANKS NUTTER: Oh, that's OK.
- BEREK: But just in terms of just in New York City with the Central Labor Council, I mean, Harry Van Arsdale was the head of the New York City Central Labor Council. He ran the building trades, which was incredibly sexist, but then again, when 1199 tried to organize hospitals and we're having strikes that were not very effective, he stopped construction, and so when the women would really sit around bad-mouthing Harry, I would defend Harry and say, "You can talk about what his union is like, but when push comes to shove, the most oppressed working women in New York City would not have a union without Harry." And those guys who didn't have a feminist bone in their bodies and probably sat there

and hooted and whistled at the women picketers when they went out in sympathy, [laugh] but in fact, they went out in sympathy.

BANKS NUTTER: Right. They're still out there.

BEREK: I was involved in, I guess this was probably the early '80s, when there was a mayoral race in New York, we all hated Ed Koch and so there was a mayoral campaign that was very union oriented and there were four union coordinators and there was three guys and me, and there was some big rally with all the big shots speaking and I was out in the audience, running around and getting things done, and Harry was up on the stage and, of course, the three guys were up on the stage. And Harry Van Arsdale looks in the audience and starts going, "Where is she? Where is she? Where is that girl? She does all the work. The girl should be here, too. Where is she?" And so, I went up on the stage and I was standing there and I was saying to myself, now, he just called me a girl. He's like 85 years old, right? He just called me a girl, but he also announced in front of the entire group that I was the only one who did the work. So you got to just sort of say to yourself, he's in his mid-eighties, he grew up in a time when calling me a girl was not insulting. But, I was insulted. So it was this sort of conflict of, you turn to Harry and [sneer] or you just get up on stage and say, he recognized my work.

And that was sort of symbolically kind of a lot of the whole relationship between CLUW and the labor movement: they treated us like girls but they also, because they began to realize they had to, took on our issues. And so times change and things ultimately happen. I have three nieces who all went to what I think of as men's colleges, and, with the exception of the youngest of them, who went to Amherst, which went coed in the 1970s, the older two don't even have a clue they were men's colleges. They don't. They went to Harvard and Yale, you know?

BANKS NUTTER: Yes, and when you tell them, oh, it was the '60s, late '60s, early '70s, when this changed — lifetimes ago.

BEREK: Lifetimes ago and when you're dealing with male union leaders who grew up lifetimes before that, you sort of take what you can get out of them, and if they're willing to recognize the importance of your work, but they can't quite make it into understanding the terminology, or even the personal interaction, and I'm not talking about sexual harassment, because that's unacceptable, but calling you a girl.

BANKS NUTTER: As he's calling you up on the stage to recognize you.

BEREK: Right.

BANKS NUTTER: Was it hard, though, at the time?

BEREK: Oh, yes. But again, you're just sort of standing there going, do I want to hit him or do I want to thank him? [laugh] But because with him it was sort of easy, because I had this underlying feeling of being grateful because I was a hospital worker. I wasn't a professional who came in, and without Harry, I wouldn't have been anywhere. I wouldn't have had a union to be in, to be doing any of this, so I was always grateful to him. There were others — when we would have meetings of all the political operatives from the unions, I was usually the only woman. And one of the people who was always there was Tony Scotto [then president of the Longshoremen's Union, Brooklyn Local] who has since gone to jail —

BANKS NUTTER: I've heard the name.

BEREK: And Tony would curse. And every time Tony would curse, he would turn around and say, "Excuse me, Judy." And it just pissed me off, I mean, it really did. Because in 1999, everybody cursed, men, women, and I would say to people, "You gotta stop him from doing that." And they would say to me, "He's an old-school Italian, we can't stop him." And every once in a while, I would be sitting at the table, and I would say something like, "Ah, fuck." And I would turn around and say, "Excuse me, Tony." [laugh] And then after the meeting, guys who I was friendly with would come up to me and go, "He's a Mafia leader. What are you doing?" And I would say, "I don't care." You know, it's not that I want him to curse or I don't want him to curse. I just don't want him to apologize to me every time he curses. So, it's that kind of thing.

And in that same group of people, we were planning for election day and they asked for teams of men from the unions to put signs up on light poles and telephone poles and I got really pissed and I said, "1999 will provide two teams and they would be women," because they had asked for men. I said, "We will provide two teams of women and we will get the signs up the telephone poles just as well as the men." I thought those women were going to kill me. [laugh] But we did it. We went out on the trucks with the guys. And, we sort of formed teams of bigger women and littler women, you know, the bigger women would push the little women up the poles. [laugh] So that's the kind of thing that went on all the time.

BANKS NUTTER: Sort of a daily piece, which must have been tiring.

BEREK: Right. And I had it infinitely less than most women, because when I came home at the end of the day in terms of my own union, they were very respectful and they were really interested in doing the things that we were suggesting. So, I didn't have a struggle. I mean, in Marilyn Bender's union, in the Newspaper Guild, they had a struggle. Those women not only had to struggle with their bosses, they had to struggle with their union.

BANKS NUTTER: A double burden.

- BEREK: Yes, and that's a very different story.
- BANKS NUTTER: Now, just sort of thinking back to, well, almost thirty years — it was thirty years — January '74 — March '74, thirty years.
- BEREK: Scary.
- BANKS NUTTER: I know, what at the time, I guess, if you can project back, at the founding of CLUW, what — at that point, if someone would say, OK, what are this organization's goals?
- BEREK: It has to last forever, no matter what.
- BANKS NUTTER: Right. And so, what are its goals? What would you have answered in the spring of '74?
- BEREK: To get the attention of the labor movement for women's issues. To build from within. To make it a place that women's issues could be part of. Because that was the problem. It's funny, reading the quote and going, "Yes, I believe that." I believed that then and I believe that now. You know, to be inside the labor movement and still have the things you care about, cared about. To be able to use the labor movement as an organizing tool for the Equal Rights Amendment. And all that. And that it accomplished.
- BANKS NUTTER: Would you call that perhaps its greatest accomplishment in that first decade and while you were still part of it, you would say?
- BEREK: Yes. It got their attention. It got their attention. I mean, there were a lot of other things, probably, that got their attention, but, it got their attention.
- BANKS NUTTER: What do you think it was that's perhaps its major shortcoming? And again, you can confine it to your years.
- BEREK: They very quickly stopped really being an organizing organization. Once the organization existed and once the organization had a foothold, the interest in the national leadership in actually going to a plant where there were, you know, 250 men and 10 women and reaching out to those 10 women and saying, there's an organization here to help you, really did decrease enormously. It became a much more top-heavy, top-oriented organization and much less of that feeling that occurred at the convention. And that's — for me, that's an issue.
- BANKS NUTTER: Why do you think that happened?

BEREK: Well, they were always afraid of those women, anyway. That's the truth. And when you think about the conflicts, those were gutsy women. Now, in fact, the women who were afraid of them had been gutsy women in their time, too, many of them. But, you know, they were afraid of them. And they became too comfortable inside. How's the building trade going react if we start going in and talking to the women at work sites and saying, "We're going to help you file sexual harassment suits"?

BANKS NUTTER: It strikes at the heart of a major concern. And another controversy was, from what I've read, between affirmative action versus seniority.

BEREK: I am very committed to seniority. I mean, I'm a trade unionist, you know, but I also believe in affirmative action. And I've gotten into lots of trouble, more as a boss than as a union person, for really doing affirmative action. But I think that it is incumbent on unions to find ways of doing both.

BANKS NUTTER: Is it possible?

BEREK: Yes, it can be possible to find ways of moving up women and African Americans without punishing them. There are ways, and I think it's — you have to make it possible. You just have to do it, and I got sued, actually, when I was working for the City and went to trial. I was accused of discriminating by a white male, discriminating against, in favor of African American women. The male wasn't competent, and it was very funny, because when I got called in by the [New York City] corporation counsel, I was already working for the federal government and they wanted to know why I hadn't promoted him, and I looked the guy straight in the eye and this will reflect badly on my character, and said, "He's a fucking moron." [laugh] And the lawyer looked at me and I said, "Your job as my attorney is to figure out the appropriate term for me to use in the courtroom, but I'm telling you, that's why I didn't promote him." And after they deposed him, they came back and they said to me, "Oh, my God, you're right." [laugh]

BANKS NUTTER: And there are no other words.

BEREK: I said, "This was not a — if all things are equal. This guy — I don't know what he thinks." And at the end of the trial, the jury came up to me and said, "This was so embarrassing. We're so sorry." Because the attorney was very impressed because I was then the head of program integrity nationally for the Medicare program and so I had to come and spend three days in New York to stand trial, and this very young attorney who was representing me made this huge fuss about what I did, and so this whole jury came up to me, saying, "We're so sorry that somebody with such an important job had to sit here for three days with this idiot."

But, you know, it's a commitment I had and I think there's a way of doing it. And I really must admit, when I was a boss, I pissed off the union in New York City by doing affirmative action, because what had gone on, what I thought so wrong, and so I just tried to create a little better balance and I made them completely crazy.

BANKS NUTTER: Well, it still, I think, remains a potentially divisive issue. Right, there's been movement that tries to answer both, but it's tough.

BEREK: But I think most of the people trying to do it don't care that they create divisiveness. I think that's part of the problem, is that there are very few people who respect both causes. And obviously, I made huge messes when I did both but I did respect both and I really did try to do it within both.

BANKS NUTTER: Sometimes it's described as this loyalty issue, loyalty to the labor movement and loyalty to the women's movement. And sometimes, I'm not sure if loyalty is the right word, but were there times when as a union officer, although albeit of an exceptional union, did you feel torn?

BEREK: No, but that's the nature of my union. You know, I mean, that was the nature of my union. I didn't have to feel torn.

BANKS NUTTER: If you'd been in the UAW or –

BEREK: Right. And also, we were on the edge of the AFL-CIO. We were in, but they hated us, you know, so my loyalty was very different than, say, Joyce Miller's loyalty. I mean, she was in the Amalgamated [Clothing and Textile Workers Union] — they were a very integral part of the AFL-CIO. They were embraced. So she would have a very different — if she had the conflicts, which I don't think she did. I think she had very clear loyalty internal to the labor movement and that was that. But it would be very different in that union than my union or in the Newspaper Guild — the same kind of conflicts. But in my union, not until the beginning of the change in leadership, which is why I left — because if you can't be 100 percent loyal and believe in everything you're doing, why are you there?

BANKS NUTTER: Now, CLUW still exists.

BEREK: Yep.

BANKS NUTTER: But you're no longer involved?

BEREK: No, I left the labor movement. I became a boss.

BANKS NUTTER: Yes, that's OK, Judy, we still like you. You're a good boss.

BEREK: When I worked for New York City, I was the head of Personnel Labor Relations and Training for the Welfare Department. There were people in that operation who had been activists in CLUW, who knew me as the president of CLUW in New York, and here I came in as head of personnel. And some of that was good.

BANKS NUTTER: Did it help?

BEREK: Some of it helped, yes.

BANKS NUTTER: Do you have any sense of CLUW today?

BEREK: No. I've never even looked. It's sort of funny.

BANKS NUTTER: Just — from a personal standpoint, do you feel — are they still needed today in the way that they were, vis-à-vis the labor movement?

BEREK: Absolutely. I mean, it's much better, you know, when you look at the labor movement today and you look at the officers of unions and you look at the people who are spokespeople, and there are many more women there but it's still a man's world, I'm sorry.

BANKS NUTTER: So, having gotten those issues on the labor agenda, they're still there —

BEREK: They're still there and I'm friendly with a few people who are still at 1199, and one of them is Debby King, who's doing an enormous amount to build daycare in all unions around the country, but it's still a big issue. It's still a fight. It is still a struggle to keep that on the bargaining table and keep that on the front burner. And it's thirty years later. Now, there's more of it than there was thirty years ago, but it's still a struggle. And some of it is that the labor movement is under such attack and economically things are so hard, it is very difficult to make any kind of gain at all. But it's still a struggle.

BANKS NUTTER: Do you think those issues are still identified as women's issues?

BEREK: They are less purely women's issues than they were.

BANKS NUTTER: From the standpoint of labor?

BEREK: From the standpoint of labor, but they're still — for the most part, they're still women pushing them. It's just, you know, the reality. One of my colleagues in the federal government, her husband also works for the federal government. She had a baby, and she took off three months and she went back to work and her husband took off three months. That's more the way of the world. When I watch my nieces and their husbands, there is no question that childcare is a shared responsibility. And with one of my nieces, she's the primary wage earner and he's the

primary parent. But in all of them, there is no question. And that's just a different world. I mean, not that my father wasn't nice to me, but he wasn't a primary caretaker. And my brother was certainly not a primary caretaker of my nieces. My sister-in-law gave up her career, dropped out of graduate school –

BANKS NUTTER: That was in the '60s?

BEREK: Yes, and put my brother through graduate school. And I don't think she's sorry. And I hope she's not sorry because she certainly had a — has a great life and great kids and great grandchildren, and is very respected by her friends and family, so I don't look upon it as a mistake, but I think — it was just a different time.

BANKS NUTTER: But among working-class women, for the people still being organized, or are part of 1199, is there an option of going without one parent's salary?

BEREK: Very rarely.

BANKS NUTTER: So those kind of decisions are made by other people?

BEREK: Yes. I think that in organizing in fields where there are a lot of women, the existence of — the role of women's issues in the labor movement is critical in organizing, or the traditional women's issues. I will tell you, when I was working for the state, I got sent to the Kennedy School, the program for the state and local government officials, to become a better manager and in almost each session, they would have somebody from the American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees in the class, and the person who was in the class, when I was in the class, was a very old friend of mine. He [Rob McGarrah] was the health policy person from AFSCME, so when I was the health policy person from 1199, we had worked together. And they were just starting to organize the clerical workers at Harvard and I went to the meetings. He would have sessions and he said to me, "Would you come?" and that was my extracurricular activity while I was a state official at the Kennedy School.

BANKS NUTTER: You just couldn't stay away from that union meeting.

BEREK: And, Rob would just sort of say, "Would you come and just sort of tell them what you used to do?" And I would, and it was my little contribution, but, that was ten years later, and there were still vital issues.

BANKS NUTTER: And they remained, so, for a number of reasons. As you pointed out.

END TAPE 3

## TAPE 4

**BANKS NUTTER:** Well, let's see. So we've wrapped up CLUW in a neat little package. It still exists and it's still needed. And, we talked yesterday about your departure from the union, from 1199 and why that was and how difficult it was for you. But why government work? What propelled you in that direction?

**BEREK:** Well, one of the things — one of my fights with Doris [Turner] was over who to endorse for governor, and Mario [Cuomo] knew I was a supporter and I didn't know what to do. I think I've said in your questions, I never planned a career. I didn't know what I wanted to be when I grew up and I never really planned to grow up, which I think part of me still hasn't —

**BANKS NUTTER:** It's a good thing.

**BEREK:** No, I don't mind. I don't have to. And, so I figured I would try to get a job, a political job in the administration and stay for a year or two and figure out what I wanted to be. I in no way assumed that this is where I was going to go and stay. It was just, let's see what will happen. And, I was sort of frozen. I mean, I couldn't figure how to do a resumé. I mean, I had never done a resumé in my life, and so one of my friends did my resumé who gave it to another of my friends who handed it to the Cuomo people, and they all sort of were, "All right, Judy, you have to do this. You have to get out of there."

And so I went into the Department of Social Services and I really had a wonderful time. I was very frustrated initially, because all that anybody wanted me to do was lobby and I kept saying, "I can do all kinds of things other than lobby. It's lobby that you saw, you know. You saw me do lobbying. But I promise you, there are other things I can do." And I really only loved lobbying for the union because I believed in everything I did. And when I went to social services, we used to hang out because we were all [New York] city people and our jobs were upstate, and we'd spend four days a week upstate and one day in the city. And so the four days upstate, you know, none of us had families and so we would hang out, and one night Cesar Perales, who was my boss, the Commissioner of Social Services, said to me, "Well, how does it feel to transition between lobbying for workers and lobbying for poor people?" and I realized that's why I liked working for him, because he saw my job as lobbying for poor people.

But I was still bored — lobbying, to be perfectly honest, and he was willing to take a chance and accept that, I mean, everybody kept saying and talking about whether I could be promoted into a management job or — "she's got no management experience" — and his comment was, "If you can put 1000 people who you don't pay on the street to work on election day and they do what you tell them, you can manage

somehow.” And I can manage people. I was never their boss. But I always got people to do things and that’s what managing is, and I guess it’s harder if you’re not their boss. I don’t know.

So he gave me a management job, and I really sort of took it on with a vengeance. I became somebody who licenses facilities. And I loved it, I like to do things where I can see change happen quickly. I mean, that was the beauty of the labor movement, and that was one of the first things I saw when I went to the union over what happened when I worked in the lab. When I worked in the lab, I started working on that project when I was 15, 14 years old, and I left, I was not quite 25, and we’d made, you know, a quarter of an inch of progress. And that first strike I told you about yesterday, those workers were making \$65 a week. And when we signed the first city-wide contract, their wages went to a hundred bucks a week. Well, you know, you want to do that, you want to do this? This seemed a whole lot better to me.

And so, I was really able to clean up facilities. I was able to work with a staff that really wanted to go out and really fix the conditions for people at homes, but hadn’t felt empowered to do it, and I was able to empower them, and — and we made a huge difference. There are a lot of people who don’t like me who own adult-care facilities that were not well run, but I was committed to doing whatever I could and it wasn’t — you know, the law makes it hard to do, it takes you a long time, but whatever we could, so we did. And so I came to like it. I mean, I really enjoyed it.

And then, when [David] Dinkins was elected [mayor of New York City], I worked in the Dinkins’ campaign — you have that version of my résumé. Bill Lynch, who was David Dinkins campaign manager [and became Deputy Mayor], and I went way back. We were involved and actually that’s where I first met Linda Tarr-Whalen, which was even before CLUW. We were involved in some work that was going on to develop new health professions. You know, he was working at City University on it, Linda was at AFSCME on it, I was at 1199 on it, and so that’s how we had met. And so we had been friends for years and years and years and years and years, through many a political campaign. And he was running the Dinkins campaign. I didn’t know David at all. I in principle supported him and so I called Bill one day and said, “You can have two weeks. Pick two. Whatever two weeks you want, pick them. I’ll give you the two weeks before the primary, I’ll give you the two weeks before the runoff, I’ll give you two weeks before the election. I have vacation time. You can have two weeks of it.” So he said, “I’m going with the primary because I don’t know if I’ve got those other two coming up.” So I took two weeks vacation and I went and I volunteered and David won the primary and they found ways to pay me and I took a leave and stayed. But I did it to help Bill. It was sort of, in my mind, it was David Dinkins who was the candidate and I supported him, but I wanted to make sure that this friend of mine who was managing the campaign got all the help he needed to win. I didn’t care

about a job, I really felt that I was at a point in what I was doing in adult services that I wanted to finish something.

So when the campaign was over, there were all kinds of stories in the paper about my becoming this or that and it was, like, I gotta go back. I don't like working in Albany any more, I mean, but I already owned this house, which I liked, but I didn't like working in Albany particularly. But I was really committed to feeling that when I left the adult services job, the changes I had made and the way the industry was supervised would stay, because you don't want to be a flash in the pan, you want to make change that lasts.

So that's why I did it. And I really came to like government. And then, Barbara Sabol, who was the Principal Deputy Commissioner in Adult Services and one of my bosses along with Cesar Perales went down to be the head of HRA [New York City Human Resources Administration] and after about 18 months, came to me and said that the organization was barely functional and one of the problems was the personnel operation, and that the way people ran the personnel traditionally didn't understand program, didn't care about program, and she knew I'd never done personnel from the manager's point of view, but I'd done it from a labor point of view so I had to be able to do it from a manager's point of view, and I was committed to program. And so, if she had somebody running the personnel shop whose commitment was to the program, that maybe we could get things moving.

And by then, I was ready to come home, and it was the worst job on the face of the earth. I mean, I loathed it. I loved working with Barbara and the mission, but never –

BANKS NUTTER: The actual work –?

BEREK: Work was disgusting. And so I did it until David lost in the reelection campaign. But then, sort of looked for a job for a while and didn't find things I liked in the city, didn't really know what I wanted and I was offered this job in Washington and the first two times, I guess, I was offered it, I said no. And I eventually realized that it was a great job and I should do it. And I had a wonderful time. I was in charge of program integrity in Medicare and Medicaid. And my job was to shake things up, you know, and it was –

BANKS NUTTER: And that was early '90s?

BEREK: Yes.

BANKS NUTTER: And so it would've been thirty years earlier your grandmother — and we talked a little bit about that yesterday, but you said she became a political activist in her seventies around the first push out of the Great Society programs?

BEREK: Yes, for Medicare and Medicaid.

BANKS NUTTER: What was she doing? I mean were you aware of it at the time?

BEREK: Oh, yes, we were all, you know, very aware of what she was doing and, you know, she was organizing people and, you know, organizing rallies and one of things that was really fun is, Miami, which is where she then lived, was — is truly the armpit of Medicare fraud and Medicaid fraud in the country. It's a little better, but it isn't much better than it was when I started out. And so the first thing I did, I was working for the federal government maybe two weeks and there I was in Miami, trying to figure out what to do, meeting with the local U.S. attorneys and so I got to spend quite a bit of time with Bob Graham, who is the Senator from Florida, and he spent a day as a Medicare fraud investigator. And so he traveled around with me for the day. I was his coach. And it was me and a couple of assistant U.S. attorneys and we drove around from rally to rally and place to place and meeting to meeting. He helped us work cases and really mostly do education and beneficiaries, and he was mayor of Miami when my grandmother was an activist.

So I said to him, "Do you remember Rose Berek?" and he looked at me and he said, "Yes." And so, it was a great moment. And I said to somebody afterwards, "You think he really did or he just said that?" And they said, "No, he has a remarkable memory." You know, he's a very smart man. I was incredibly impressed.

BANKS NUTTER: But still, it must have been a pretty cool moment.

BEREK: It was.

BANKS NUTTER: And your grandmother, I'm sure she would have approved your toting around the senator on that day.

BEREK: The senator, her former friend, the mayor.

BANKS NUTTER: Right.

BEREK: So, but it was fun and it was — whenever you do anything in Medicare and Medicaid, you're also helping women, you know.

BANKS NUTTER: In a very general sense, because I don't know how much you feel like you can talk about it or want to, but is this government work a departure or a continuation of your earlier work with the labor movement, with an emphasis on women's issues?

BEREK: Well, the places I have been in government, especially when I was a political appointee, it was very much a continuation of what I had done in the labor movement. I made a decision, I guess it's seven years ago, I

needed to come home. I'd been in Washington three years and people were being very nice to me, and begging me — Donna Shalala personally came and talked to me and asked me to please stay and I just said to her, "I can't. I can't give up living in New York." I just couldn't do it. And I was flying home every weekend.

BANKS NUTTER: To get here?

BEREK: Well, the first year this was rented and then this was empty, so I was paying a mortgage on this, my apartment in New York, and an apartment in Washington. And I said to her, "It costs me \$12,000 a year to keep this job. I can't — I can't do it. It's just — financially, I can't continue to do this, and I'm incapable of simply moving to Washington. We now know something about me. I can't live here." And, I applied for a career civil service job in New York, and I got it. And that sort of changed somewhat the nature of my role, because I was a much more, you know, sort of administrative managerial person.

And so long as the Democrats were in power, I guess I probably had a significant amount of policy influence, but when the president [Bush in 2000] was elected, it sort of put me in an awkward position, and one of the side effects of never having planned a career, for those young people who listen to this and think about it, is that it put me in a very difficult position in terms of feeling I had to stay until I had health insurance for life, because I had moved around and not stayed in one place, I didn't have health insurance that would go with me and so, I basically have to work till I'm 62 and get health insurance for life. Because I work in the Medicare program, and it is a wonderful program, but it is not enough alone. You need to have some kind of supplemental insurance on top of it, and the best way to have supplemental insurance is to have an employment-based supplemental insurance.

And so, it's different, and I'm in what's called the Senior Executive Service and we are somewhat restricted in what we can do politically. And I made a decision when I came into the Senior Executive Service, because I had been political, to be beyond reproach. And although I could write a check to a political campaign — that's legal — especially in New York, I'm too well known to think I'm being anonymous writing a check. And so, I've done nothing, which is sort of, you know —

BANKS NUTTER: Has that been hard?

BEREK: Yes. That's the biggest thing. I can't wait for the two years — it's less than two years now, to be up so that I can go back to being an activist. And I really stayed away from almost everything and, about a month ago, I guess, Betsy Wade, who was in New York Trade Union Women and at the founding convention of CLUW with me, and sued the *New York Times* for sex discrimination, and is now retired, dragged me to a book party for Gail Collins' new book and I really hadn't hung out with

any of these people in years and it was just — it was so nice to sort of walk in and see people I hadn't seen, you know, in twenty years and begin swapping business cards and talking about what's going on and I was saying, "Call me in eighteen months. I'll be ready."

BANKS NUTTER: They've got their calendars marked.

BEREK: Yes. I have to work once I retire, unless I want to sell this, and I don't want sell my house, but I can work in a way where I can go back to using my organizing skills, which is what I'd really like to do. I made this list of issues I would like to go out there and organize around.

BANKS NUTTER: Well, we can get to those. I did want to ask you about the political campaigns you worked on, the [Herman] Badillo [campaign for New York State Comptroller] and Dinkins. I mean, what was it that drew you to those specifically?

BEREK: Well, the Badillo campaign, I was asked to do. I was working in social services and, Herman was running for comptroller while Mario Cuomo was running for reelection and one of Mario's senior political people called me and asked me if I would do it, and my famous remark was I told him I was too busy, because I loved what I was doing. I mean, I really liked supervising these facilities and stuff, and I went in to Cesar Perales and I told him I had said that and he said, "Well, I hope you didn't say you were too busy with any work I gave you, you dip-shit." [laugh] and he said to me, "How did you say that?" and I said, "Well, I" — and I went back and said, "I don't know why I said that." It was very hard. But I went down and I did it and there was an incumbent comptroller who was very popular and it was sort of a lost-cause campaign from the beginning, but anyway, so was the Dinkins campaign but there we won. And we worked very hard and we did the best we could, and it was — it was a tough campaign.

BANKS NUTTER: Were there — I mean, were there particular issues at stake beyond the being asked in that drew you?

BEREK: No, that was a very much, you work in politics, you go do this, go do it.

BANKS NUTTER: And the Dinkins campaign?

BEREK: No, the Dinkins campaign was much, much more, as I said, I mean, it started with my relationship with Bill and it was a crusade, it was really a fun thing to do. It was filled with bright young people and a real enthusiasm to make change in New York and to have the first African American mayor and to reflect the sort of coming of age of the city, and so that was really fun. It was very hard work. I used to come in around, between 9 and 10 every morning and usually drop Bill Lynch off in his

apartment in Harlem — he lived on 137<sup>th</sup> Street and I lived on 96<sup>th</sup> Street. I would — at about somewhere between 2 and 3 in the morning, Harold Ickes, Bill Lynch and I would get in my car and I would drop Harold on 79<sup>th</sup> — 77<sup>th</sup> Street and then drive up, drop Bill off at 137<sup>th</sup> and loop back down into my garage, drop for 20 minutes, shower, dress, come back, and I was very much an inside person in that campaign. I was the person who was almost always physically there, and didn't leave. And so, I would come in, in absolutely the tackiest clothing because I didn't have time to wash clothes, anything, so, it was very funny because the people who initially met me in the campaign, when the campaign was over and I would show up some places, as the Deputy Commissioner for Adult Services, dressed as a deputy commissioner should be dressed, they would look at me and go, "Judy? Is that you?" [laugh] And I'd say, "Yes, you know, you can dress the girl up." But then, in that campaign, I really started out just doing, you know, operational stuff, but I then got dragged into this very late-night policy group, which was the media consultants, and Andrew Cuomo became very involved, and Harold, and Bill, because as you can tell by these names, they were all men and —

BANKS NUTTER: Ickes — is he the son of the WPA [Works Progress Administration] Ickes?

BEREK: Yes, he's the son. And he was deputy chief of staff to Bill Clinton. And a character. A truly wonderful lovable character, which I understand his father was, too.

BANKS NUTTER: From what I've read of him, his dad was too.

BEREK: And so, there were no women in the group and there was nobody in the group who was Jewish. It's just who was there, you know? And so they said, "Yes, your main job is to keep the trains running on time, but you'd better do this, too." And so that was the point at which I never stopped, because we would go back to Bob Strum's apartment.

BANKS NUTTER: So you were the woman/Jew?

BEREK: I was the Jewish woman, and the main Jewish polling that went on, there was the general polls and they would get results and then, my mother lived in an apartment complex that was all Jewish. It no longer is but it was then. And we would all joke about, we would get these polls which would say that David was going to get a sizable Jewish vote, and then we would send my mother to the laundry room. She would come back and my mother was right —

BANKS NUTTER: That was a major concern in that campaign.

BEREK: Right. And that was a major issue, and David did not poll a large Jewish vote. He polled enough to win the first time around but he did not poll a large Jewish vote and so my mother's polling was much more accurate and reflective than the actual polling that would go on, because — it's very interesting, because people are really afraid to have the pollsters think they're racist. It's just mind boggling.

BANKS NUTTER: In one of my general anecdotal observations among my own family is that American Jews tend to want to present themselves as politically liberal, not all, but —

BEREK: Not any more.

BANKS NUTTER: Well, no, but twenty years ago, and that — remains a piece, I think, for New York City politics.

BEREK: Yes, and my mother did support David and she would, but the day she called me up to tell me that a woman who had been at Communist Party rallies with her when she was a teenager had come into the laundry room and said she was not voting for David Dinkins, she said, "You're in real trouble."

BANKS NUTTER: And she was right.

BEREK: Yes, it was — it's a shame. I mean, it makes me feel sad that that's true, but it is what it is, and I'll do what I can to —

BANKS NUTTER: Well, as a way to sort of segue into what we call the wrap-up/reflections piece in this process, so much of what you've talked about, what's propelled you into various situations and careers despite your lack of career planning, is this what you call, wanting to effect change and wanting to see change and be a part of that process. I guess, could you sort of generally talk about or summarize how you see this? And you've done this in different vehicles within the labor movement, in the women's movement, and now through government, and sort of in a grassroots but also at above level. In any of those, is there one that you see, looking forward, as the most effective vehicle for social —?

BEREK: You can do it from anywhere. I've had wonderful jobs since I left the union, and I'm incredibly proud of some of the things I've done. There is nothing I am prouder of than my career with the union. Nothing. You know, my government office is lined with Bread & Roses posters, the Women of Hope series lines the walls of my office, and it was a great time and a great movement.

In the federal government, I recommended changes that were enacted into law that literally have saved millions of dollars from my program integrity work. I got, you know, my handshake from Bill

Clinton and, like every other woman, was completely mesmerized by him [laugh], and I actually won this presidential rank award and what I won it for, really and truly, was for bringing the things I learned as a union organizer into government.

When the new Medicare program, Medicare Plus Choice, was set up, which everybody thought was going to make a huge difference — initially all these managed-care plans came in and then after a year, they decided they weren't making any money and they left, and people were suddenly left without managed care, and they were having a lot of trouble finding a new managed-care plan if that was what they wanted. And we were getting millions of phone calls and everybody was sort of half hysterical over it and I called in the heads of all the remaining managed-care plans in New York State, and I said, "We will have health fairs. You will come there. You will have booths to sign people up." And then we brought in all the Medi-gap insurers, which are for people on fee-for-service who get extra insurance and we brought in the state Medicaid agency and the state prescription drug plan, and we said, "You will all be in the room. And we will invite the Medicare beneficiaries to come and not have to make a million phone calls, but everything will be there and they will figure out what they need, you know, like every half hour or so, we will have somebody who'll make a little speech to the latest group of people to come in and explain what's going on and then they'll come through and then you'll sign them up."

And the plans all agreed. I will say that. Blue Cross, which was the biggest plan, I had called the CEO in advance and I said, "Will you do this?" And he said, "Well, if you can make everybody else do it, I'll do it." So, when he was in the room I had him, but that's also organizing. That's also what I learned from Moe Foner is you don't go into a room if you haven't got at least one skill who's going to help you make meeting move.

**BANKS NUTTER:** And hopefully it's the big one.

**BEREK:** Right. The best thing is the biggest one. And it then became the way we did business. We then developed a national program. New York was hit first and worst, the first year. And nobody else did that in the country and they all looked in complete amazement at what I had done, and then we set up a program nationally just like that. And that was my organizing skill. It had nothing to do with what I had learned in my previous, I guess by then it was about eighteen years in government, or in the Kennedy School. It was what I learned from Moe Foner organizing hospital workers.

**BANKS NUTTER:** And what you're saying to me is basically you're getting the people who are the recipients of this service, you're letting them come in and make decisions.

BEREK: And helping them make decisions.

BANKS NUTTER: And facilitating.

BEREK: Facilitating them. We had meetings with 3000 people. You know, in Nassau and Suffolk County [on Long Island], we had meetings with 3000 people come in. And it was a grassroots way of facilitating it, and that was sort of the nature of my being. Now, I will say that the administrator who just left was very interested in reaching people but not in a grassroots way, and set up a television media campaign and has this blimp that got lots of in theory bad publicity and his attitude was any publicity is good publicity, and he's right. I've an enormous amount of respect for what he's done. It isn't the way I would have done it because I come from the grassroots organizing. But it's the making sure that we as a government agency reach directly to the people who use the program. And not let it filter through a million different places for it to get to them but for us to sort of be there and available to reach out to them. So I really have a lot of respect for that piece that he's done.

So I like organizing. I like working with people. I think best in thinking with people and I do best. So some day I'll do it again.

BANKS NUTTER: Well, you said in your bio statement that your career has been a series — I'm quoting you now — “positive and negative opportunities and some very good mentoring.” And you've mentioned Moe Foner several times and a couple others. Is there anyone else who comes to mind?

BEREK: Well, there are a lot of women who — we mentored each other, like Betsy Wade, and Joan Cook, who used to be involved the Newspaper Guild, who died a couple of years ago, even there were times with Connie Kopelov. I mean, there are a lot of women, Debbie King, who is still involved in 1199 — Debbie is one day older than I am —

BANKS NUTTER: That's important.

BEREK: And, all right, she's much older than me. There are a lot of people like that who, I wouldn't sort of say they were mentors because we're really sort of peers, but they've helped me.

BANKS NUTTER: Support system?

BEREK: Yes.

BANKS NUTTER: And you've probably helped them, too. I mean, it's a mutual thing.

BEREK: Yes, it just is out there and one of the things that happens when you're single is, you build a network of close friends who are your family, and so I've got that network, which is, you know, incredibly important to

me. And actually, my sort of oldest, closest friend is Dutch and we met in 1967 when I quite shockingly went to the Middle East and I was in Greece for three weeks and she and her husband were — I guess they'd been married for about eight or nine years, they had three little kids, and it was the first time they'd gone on vacation without their kids, and I was at that point a hospital worker and he was an advertising executive in Holland and she was a mostly stay-at-home mom who was doing pro bono work for the gypsies in the Netherlands as a lawyer, she's a lawyer, and she eventually became a major, major player in equal education opportunity for women in Holland, chairing commissions, writing papers, and became a very important feminist and I became a union official and a feminist and it's sort of so funny because when we think about — and she has long since divorced that husband and when you think about the fact that at the point when we became friends, we were so different from what we gradually became, and we just sort of moved in very similar directions, so I spent a lot of time in Holland.

BANKS NUTTER: So you've stayed friends over all these years and distance?

BEREK: Oh, yes, her children call me Aunt Judy, her grandchildren call me Aunt Judy.

BANKS NUTTER: That's wonderful.

BEREK: One of my very favorite stories is one of her grandchildren was overheard bragging to his friends that his Aunt Judy spoke the same language as Donald Duck and the Ninja Turtles. [laugh] So, and this is really hot stuff. But the two of us became feminists in parallel in different countries in different worlds and she's been really one of my major sort of mentors and support people.

BANKS NUTTER: And what does that say, is it the power of feminism? Or just as a movement for your generation?

BEREK: It's the time, I think. These things needed to happen and it's sort of funny because when she first started coming here on work things, you know, and studying what was going on here, we were way ahead of Europe, and we're not anymore. You know, the European Community has a much stronger set of laws protecting women's rights. I mean, when she divorced her husband, it was equal distribution of property, point blank. She gets half of his pension. He gets half of her pension. You know? I mean it was not debatable. There are fringe things that are debatable, and if she never worked and she had no pension, well then, she gets half of his pension and he gets half of nothing. But it's sort of been interesting to sort of watch from, or having been on the vanguard —

BANKS NUTTER: What do you think happened?

BEREK: I think we stopped dead in our tracks. I just think we did. I mean — we just did. I don't quite know why.

BANKS NUTTER: Somewhere in the '80s?

BEREK: Yes. But, I am looking forward to being an independent agent back in the political world again.

BANKS NUTTER: Let's talk about that — I mean, I don't know how much you can —

BEREK: Well, I really have absolutely no interest in going back into electoral politics, particularly, but I really do have a lot of interest in going into advocacy politics and using what I've learned from having been inside government to, in many ways, get involved with the groups that have been pushing me. When I took over running the regional office in New York, where we supervised the surveying of nursing homes, I met with the advocacy group for nursing home residents, and I said, "If you see a problem, my request is that you bring it to me. If I can't do what you want, and you have to do something else, my request is that you tell me the night before if it will be on the front page of the *New York Times* so I can tell my boss and I don't get into trouble. But I understand there's just so much I can do, you know, and if I can't do it all, that's your job to do the rest of it. You know, government has its limits in what we can do and I expect, you know, the advocates to push the rest of the buttons." And, so I've worked with these advocates for a long time and there are things I know, and I'm looking forward to being a, you know, little old lady in sneakers [laugh] and working with them and on an assortment of issues: women's issues, health issues, but a lot of issues that I know from the inside.

A couple of my colleagues from the federal government have, people who have had stable careers from the beginning to the end, who could retire, who could retire when they were 55, who are now doing some of that and they're having a wonderful time.

BANKS NUTTER: So, is that, when you see yourself, five years from now, is that what you see?

BEREK: Five years from now, I will have — this is my theory, this is my life plan, is I can retire in April 2005 and I plan to. I then need to earn enough money to pay this house off, which will take me till I'm 65 and will then take my social security, then be ready world. I'm back to where I was in 1968 when I started organizing in 1199 except I will have at my disposal all the things I learned from twenty years of 1199 membership and twenty years of working in government.

BANKS NUTTER: And if you could sum that up, what you've learned in those years?

BEREK: I know how the system works. I know the sources and places of power and how to play it, which is, I think, vital. I mean, I've worked in every level of government, and I know how to play them against each other and with each other, and I've learned — I know how to organize. I know how to reach people. I think I'm pretty good at bridging barriers, — I am not only capable of talking to, you know, middle-class Jewish white women, I think I'm capable of talking to lots of other kinds of people and so, I think I could help.

And, I have one friend who shall go nameless who runs an advocacy organization and he keeps saying he's making his list of the things I can do.

BANKS NUTTER: I'm sure there are several people who have noted that April 2005 date.

BEREK: And there are some things that on April 2005 I can do while doing whatever I'm going to do to pay this place off so I can keep it, and then there are other things that will just wait till I'm fully committed but it will be nice to just start, begin to do things.

BANKS NUTTER: I'm sure the issues will be there for you to go on to.

BEREK: And I fear, unfortunately, they will be very similar to what they are right this very minute. I don't think it's going to change much. I hope there's not the need for an antiwar movement to still be there, but the night before the big demonstration last February [2003], I went to the party at Ronnie Eldridge's [former NYC Council member] house and I wrote a check and somebody said, "Should you do that?" and I said, "It's perfectly legal and I'm doing it." And Ronnie got up and said, "I'd like to welcome everybody here including the people who shouldn't be here." [laugh] And I sort of looked at her and I said, "It's legal, Ronnie. I'm not at a political rally and it's perfectly legal."

BANKS NUTTER: So you couldn't go to the march?

BEREK: I did go to the march, oh, absolutely. I went to the march. I unfortunately had rotten feet, so I couldn't stay at the march very long, but I was at the march. I took a taxi to and from the march. And it was sort of very funny. I was just sort of sitting in the taxi cab going, "This is a long way." And then I started to think about it and I realized that when I was doing this, my parents were much younger than me when I first started doing this. It was sort of fun to sort of think about and look at the crowd and realize that I was, sort of, of the age now that people would look at my parents and say, "What are you doing here? You're old."

BANKS NUTTER: How did that feel?

BEREK: It was very funny. It was a very funny sense of, of realizing that. And then it was very sad –

BANKS NUTTER: That we still have to go to antiwar marches?

BEREK: Uh-hm. You just sort of look at it and say, you know? My parents started doing this in the 1930's and here am I in 2000 and something, and still doing it, and it's no less necessary and in many ways, it's even more dangerous. The sad part is, yes, it gets depressing, but you gotta get past that or you just shrivel up and give it up and I ain't willing to do that, so –

BANKS NUTTER: Yes, well, that's a good thing.

BEREK: I'll still — even if I have to take taxi cabs, I'll still be going.

BANKS NUTTER: You said, actually just a little while ago, that your work with the union, that that's what you're most proud of.

BEREK: Oh, absolutely.

BANKS NUTTER: Usually I like to ask first, is there anything you've been disappointed about and then end on a positive note but, I mean, is there –?

BEREK: Well, I don't know. I mean, there are moments, there's a part of me that says, why was I so conservative coming back to New York as to stay in government, because once I made that decision it sort of locked me in to the position where I'm now sitting here waiting for my health insurance, where I'm not having as much fun as I used to in government. But I can go back and say, you know, this decision or that decision, but basically, I've been very lucky. I mean, when you read my positives and negatives, the union blew up and I left and although there's one small part of me and I still say it's my proudest thing, that I would have liked to stay there for my entire life, the fact that I didn't has changed my opportunities enormously both in terms of the scope of people I've gotten to know, who I would've never gotten to know all over this country, and the opportunity of having, earning a decent living. When I worked for 1199, I didn't make any money, and we were the principled union and we didn't pay ourselves anything. If I had stayed, I would have stayed –

BANKS NUTTER: So, is that what you meant by it's sort of a negative opportunity? I find it an interesting phrase.

BEREK: That was a negative opportunity. Yes. That was a negative opportunity. And David losing was a negative opportunity, you know? It was. Those

were the two points in my life where I had to go find a job. And going into the Cuomo administration, I mean, I went to Mario's inauguration and as I went through the receiving line, he said, "I hear you want to come into the administration, Judy. I hope we can find you something you like." So that barely counted as looking for a job. But when David lost, I really had to look for a job, and it was a difficult experience. It was sort of a surprising experience to me, to just have to do that and I still have this sort of thing about doing a résumé and the only reason you got a résumé is that I got nominated for an award and they asked for a résumé, and it was like, OK, and then my committee of friends [laugh], all got together and worked on my résumé with me.

**BANKS NUTTER:** That's great. Well, it's a very good one. Tell them they did a very good — I'm very impressed.

**BEREK:** I should tell them they did a good job? Oh, good. I will tell the committee of friends — all women, except for my brother, who was also involved. We'd give it to him to read on the theory that he has nothing to do with health care or government and if he could understand it, then we were on the right track. Because it was not being written to get a job, it was being written for this award thing and then for you, and so we figured we'd better have a reader, so my brother was the reader.

**BANKS NUTTER:** Well, they all did a fine job. This has been a great conversation, which I've so very much enjoyed, and I guess at this point, I would just add if there's anything else you want to say or that you have dredged up or I've caused you to reflect on?

**BEREK:** Well, I will tell you my favorite personal moment with one of the people that I think is one of the world's great feminists, which is Bella Abzug, and in my bio, you know that I was very briefly married, which was an irrelevant incident in my life, partly — with the exception with this event — as I was sort of getting my divorce, I decided to go on a diet, this is very common and so I was actually looking very good. And I was at some big political dinner and I absolutely can't remember what it was, and Bella was there and she was talking to me and somebody came up to me, not knowing I was now getting a divorce because I had just gotten married, and said, "Marriage agrees with you. You look terrific." And Bella looked at them and said, "She's rid of him. Who needs him? She'll get another one if she wants one." And she spent almost the entire evening standing there with her arm around me, batting people away with this, because it was just a natural thing, you know? I had gotten married five months before and I looked good, so people would say, "Marriage agrees with you." And she'd say, "She doesn't need him. He's gone." And it was the point at which you realized that for all her bravado, underneath it all, she was an incredible

mother. And she just decided at that party, I needed mothering and I got it.

And it was sort of very funny because every time 1199 did something Bella didn't like, she would call me up and say, "I know, Judy, that you would do it and Moe's not letting you." Now, Bella and Moe were in the same band in the 1950's, The Foner Brothers Suspended Swing, and Bella was in the band. That's how far they go back, but she would always say, "But I know, Judy, you would do it. It's just Moe keeping you from doing it." And believe me, it was very rare that Moe crossed her. But she wasn't really a mentor in the sense of daily helping me live my life, but in terms of just the founding of Women Strike for Peace and all the other things she did, and it's funny, because I have all these Women of Hope posters in my office and they're all framed. I did not frame the Bella poster, because they were framed by the government, which means when I leave they belong to the government and I wasn't going to leave my Bella poster. So that's at home. Even though it would be nice to have her in the office, it's at home because I would never give it up because she was just wonderful.

BANKS NUTTER: Well, it's a great life that you could be a part of.

BEREK: Oh, when you think — remember, I said to you earlier that I consider myself incredibly lucky to have been part of 1199 at the point where Leon had really come in to his own as a leader in building the Hospital Workers Union and Moe was there and the creativity and the encouragement of creativity was just a wonderful thing.

BANKS NUTTER: Well, it's carried you well and you'll get back to it. April 2005.

BEREK: '05. You got it.

END TAPE 4

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