

Interview with Bill Friedheim by Irwin Yellowitz
A project of the Professional Staff Congress Archives Committee
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Irwin: Today is January 8th, 2016. I am Irwin Yellowitz and I will be interviewing Bill Friedheim for the PSC oral history project.

Bill, could we start out with the usual question about your background? Give us some idea of what you were like before you came to CUNY.

Bill: Well, I was born in 1938 in Rockville Centre, Long Island, a suburb about 20 miles outside the city - not a terribly exciting place. I was born into a family that was probably liberal in its politics. Political influence when I was a kid was probably most influenced by my Rabbi and we were kind of a secular Jewish family, member of a reformed Jewish congregation, but it was led by a man named Roland Gittlesohn, who and I remember as a teenager, you know, we go to services every Friday night and every Friday night he would have a sermon attacking Joseph McCarthy.

He later became, you know, one of the first clergy, together with Martin Luther King and [William Sloane] Coffin, the Yale chaplain, to publically oppose the war in Vietnam during the 1960's, so even though I had kind of secular Jewish upbringing I was certainly influenced by Roland Gittelsohn.

I went to Princeton University as an undergraduate where I got a good education, but Princeton was not a terribly exciting place and at that time the student body was quite conservative - faculty not necessarily so.

In 1960 I went out to Madison, Wisconsin to do graduate history work. Wisconsin I found to be a much more exciting place because it was a big university, a diverse student population and also in the very early 60's Wisconsin was one of the more active campuses, together with Berkley and Ann Arbor and, you know, other big public universities.

And my view of the world was certainly influenced by much of what was happening in the early 60's. In 1964, '65 I taught for a year at a two-year extension of the university in Wausau, Wisconsin, a town way north in Wisconsin. In fact, on April 1, 1965, the temperature was minus 30 degrees in Wausau, Wisconsin.

Irwin: Plenty of snow, I'm sure.

Bill: Plenty of snow. Right. Not too much more snow than New York, but it never melted, so it just accumulated and accumulated and I decided that was

certainly a place to get out of. And in 1965 I got a job at the Borough of Manhattan Community College and thought it would be temporary. Well, 41 years later - you know, I retired in 2006 -

Irwin: Right.

Bill: - and spent a long and actually, very good time there.

Irwin: Okay. When you came to CUNY, which has just been formed in 1961, Israel Kugler was leading an effort to introduce a union into CUNY and it was called United Federation of College Teachers and you were one of the first people to join in and become a leader. So why did you choose to join UFCT?

Bill: Well, there was already a UFCT chapter at BMCC in 1965. BMCC was created in 1964. I believe it opened September 1964. I came September 1965. There was a small UFCT chapter. I kind of almost immediately gravitated to it. It was run by a very proper guy, Roger [Dooley], Irish-Catholic from Buffalo, New York; an English professor, a movie critic. He wrote movie reviews for the Diocese newspaper for Buffalo, New York and actually was quite a good movie reviewer. And Roger was happy to have anybody join the UFCT.

Roger was not particularly - well, he was liberal, but, you know, certainly not particularly radical. I don't think he had a union background in his family, but there he was. In 1966 he asked me if I would run for chapter chair, he didn't want to do it anymore, but continued to be active. So I did that and won because the election was uncontested - wasn't terribly difficult and I don't know - we had a sizeable chapter, but, of course, no bargaining recognition from the administration nor did the UFCT -

Irwin: Not yet. It was to come.

Bill: - citywide. And, you know, after that, you know, I met Israel Kugler. I probably met you, although I don't distinctly remember when I met you. At BMCC, what, we started and I have copies here, you know, which - we started a chapter newsletter called the Gadfly, which kind of reflected my view of how to organize at a chapter.

The Gadfly was more than just a union letter. It was primarily a union newsletter, but it was also a newsletter that helped build a sense of community. We encouraged people to contribute poems to it. Roger contributed movie reviews to it, we had some humor in it and I think that worked. I think people really looked forward to each issue of the Gadfly and it drew more people around us.

The issues back then were rather tame compared to what we would confront at BMCC in the 1970's and certainly when I was chapter chair in the mid and late 90's. I got to know Kugler, I got to know [Irvin Pankin], who was the director of organization for the PSC.

Irwin: He works for the UFCT.

Bill: For the UFCT and later

Irwin: Yeah.

Bill: - for the - not executive director, but director of organization. Was that the same title he had at -

Irwin: Yes.

Bill: - the UFCT.

Irwin: Yes.

Bill: But he was the chief staff person at the UFCT. And became very friendly with Irv. Irv kind of took me under his wing and liked to argue with me because Irv was, you know, getting into kind of the esoteric, you know, movements of the left. He was a Schachtman - follower of Mack [Max] Schachtman. Albert Shanker's secretary was Schachtman's wife in the UFCT and Albert Shanker was a Schachtmanite, as was Sandra Feldman. They've all supported the American effort in Vietnam. I opposed it - got into lots of arguments with Irv Pankin, but they're always very friendly.

And the other thing we had that bonded us is that we're both New York Knickerbocker fans and he had season tickets, so occasionally I got to see a Knickerbocker game, but that's not the main reason why I became involved in the UFCT.

And then the UFCT had a citywide newsletter and to the best of my memory I approached Is Kugler and said, you know, I'd be willing to be editor if we expanded the newspaper - turned it into, you know, really a newspaper in tabloid form. And, of course, we got a lot of help from the AFT down in Washington. And, in fact, [it] became, I believe, a monthly newspaper - I thought a pretty good newspaper, not because I was editor, but because I think the politics of the UFCT was quite good.

As you know, at that point there was a Legislative Conference who took more of the approach, not of trade unionism, but of lobbying. Actually they were pretty good at it, I think, but not a union approach to how to organize faculty.

So for a couple of years I edited the newspaper and as I said, with a lot of help from AFT people in Washington. I would go down there once a month. We would lay out the paper. They would help with copy editing and [I] certainly became a committed member of the UFCT and, obviously, was involved at the time when we moved for [a] collective bargaining election; when there actually was an election. We ended up representing lecturers and people on non-tenured lines. We lost to the Legislative Conference, by not too much as I remember, and had there been one bargaining unit there no doubt, if you combine the votes, that the UFCT would have prevailed.

And so there I was for a number of years with the UFCT. I was the chapter chair in 1972 when the Legislative Conference and the UFCT merged. And so at that point, for the first year or two, was co-chapter chair, you know, with the person who had been chair of the Legislative Conference at BMCC, Joe Winters.

So that takes me up to '72 and at the time when there was a PSC.

Irwin: Right. And before we get to the PSC itself - maybe we should move immediately to the PSC. You became the - you were the chapter chair in the PSC, first year of the PSC, with Joe Winters, and then you continued to be active at the chapter level during the 1970's. Could you tell us what the major issues were at BMCC during that period and how you reacted to them?

Bill: Well, actually, I got a pile of notes here, which I'm not going to read verbatim for you, but it helps refresh my memory. I mean, the main issue was around the president of the college, Edward Draper. Edward Draper became president - he was appointed acting president in the summer of 1970 when the then president, [Murray Block], stepped down after a number of students and some faculty had been arrested, supposedly for trespassing in the building. Of course the charges were immediately thrown out. How can they trespass -

Irwin: In their own building.

Bill: - in their own building. And Draper pretty much ran the college into the ground. The college, at that point, was in rented facilities in midtown Manhattan on West 50th Street between 6th and 7th Avenue, a building on 7th Avenue and then eventually a third building, also, I believe on 7th Avenue or Broadway and 50th Street.

The faculty developed a governance plan and faculty and student body voted on the governance plan, approved it - Draper sat on it - did nothing with it. Draper was also moved - was accused and it's true of taking some funds from what was then the student fee. There was no tuition, but there was a student fee that students had to pay - and used that money for all sorts of different kinds of perks.

He did little to really make a go of open admissions, but providing the necessary remedial services. And he did nothing, while the college occupied, eventually, another building, called the N Building, on West 68th Street. I believe it was once a Knights of Pythias temple. It has six-feet, thick walls and the building was a horror story - an absolute horror story - live wires all over the place, an elevator system that constantly failed inspection. I actually thought that it was a death trap. I mean, eventually, after a lot of pressure we moved out of the building, but that was after Draper had been removed as president.

In 1974 Draper decided that he was going to throw himself a testimonial dinner at the old Americana Hotel. And this is what really kind of brought things to a head because he put tremendous pressure on faculty to buy tickets and students to buy tickets. The tickets were \$20, which may seem very little very right now, but given the fact that inflation has probably increased five-fold or six-fold since then, I mean, you're talking about what would be over \$100 in today's currency.

And Draper wanted to indicate to the Board of - I believe it was the Board of Higher Education -

Irwin: Yes.

Bill: - back then and to the chancellor, who was Kibbee at that point, that he had the support of faculty. And faculty were really outraged. Some of them were scared. I

mean a lot of faculty - over 200 actually bought tickets. A larger number did not buy tickets.

And the union organized an ad hoc committee against the dinner. We picketed the dinner on March 29th, 1975. And it was an indication of the kind of intimidation, you know, that the Draper administration brought to the faculty, but there was a lot of resistance despite the fear that was there by faculty and the union played a kind of key role in that and I must say I headed the ad hoc committee. I was no longer chapter chair at the point that [I] organized, you know, against the dinner.

In May of '74 - yeah, the testimonial dinner - did I [say] was it was '75? It was March '74 - March 29th, 1974.

Irwin: Oh, okay.

Bill: And in May of that year - could be administration, chancellor could be - leaked the story to the New York Times, which made the front page of the New York Times, which, I think its intent was really to build a case against Draper, but basically what the story in the Times did is ended up, I think seriously, disingenuous - claiming that students were getting inflated grades, that students were absconding with funds, so forth and so on, and not dealing with the issues that we had brought to the table in response to the Draper administration.

If I can go back some, in 1972 when I was chair and co-chaired with Joe Winters, we actually put out four-page tabloid bill of particulars against Draper. Unfortunately, I haven't been able to find copies of that. If I do I will certainly give it to the PSC for archive purposes.

So that put us in kind of a funny position. I mean, on one hand the Times article really scarred the reputation, deservedly so, of Edgar Draper. On the other hand it really scarred the reputation of our students and of the college. Two years later, on June 24th 1977, there was front page story in the New York Times which kind of titillated the faculty at BMCC because what it showed is that a Middle States Accrediting Association report on the college had been doctored and this was really quite scandalous - that originally the middle states report had been somewhat critical of the Draper administration, although I thought it was rather mild.

And Draper reacted to that and asked the head of the Middle State Accrediting team, who at that point was being fired as president of Essex Community College in Newark. [He prevailed upon him] to actually change the report.

And what was indicated in the Times is that clearly part of the report was written on a typewriter that was traced to Draper's office. The other part of the report, I guess, was written on a typewriter that was traced to Essex Community College. Draper didn't survive very long after that and in late August 1977 he was dismissed by the Board of Higher Education. So this ended, I think, a sorry chapter in the history of BMCC, but I have no doubt that faculty organization and union organization, not just simply Draper's misdeeds that made the front page of the New York Times, you know, led to his eventual downfall.

Irwin: Now, this was taking place during the fiscal crisis -

Bill: Right.

Irwin: - the larger fiscal crisis which affected New York and had disastrous impact on CUNY in general. Do you recall the -

Bill: Well, I do.

Irwin: - impact of that and what role the union played and how effective you think it was?

Bill: Well, at BMCC what it led to was the eventual dismissal of 47 faculty. They were supposed to be dismissed in order of seniority. The Draper administration, particularly in the English department, fooled around with the list and dismissed a couple of people who had been particularly active in the union, one of whom eventually got her job back. And the person who was bumped up, you know, felt very guilty, you know, somebody that I'm still very friendly with. I won't mention her name, you know, that her job was saved and that this other woman's job disappeared.

So that was part of the Bill of Particulars that we worked up against - well, added to the Bill of Particulars that we had originally drawn up in 1972. So it had a very real effect at BMCC. And quite to my surprise, you know, as I was kind of thumbing through old documents, I found a document that indicated there was a PSC strike committee. I mean, it was on literature using the PSC, you know, CUNY logo - that I was chair of the strike committee -

Irwin: At BMCC?

Bill: - at BMCC, right. You know, and I'm kind of surprised since this literature must have been published or printed at the union office.

Irwin: What date was that? Do you have a date for it?

Bill: I don't, but it's clearly 1975 or '76. And this committee worked together with students. I don't know if the clerical staff was then unionized by DC-37 or not, but I remember -

Irwin: I think it was. Yeah.

Bill: No. So there's was talk of that in the air. I mean, obviously, it never happened and, of course, what did happen eventually is the university was closed for a period of time and that's another story, which maybe necessarily we won't - other's have gone into in interviews in terms of what happened with that.

I also together with a number of other faculty, some of whom eventually became involved in the New Caucus, you know, 18 or 20 years later, went down to the PSC and we pushed the union to open up it's phone lines and call people in terms of mobilizing for a big demonstration, which eventually did happen, I believe on Chambers Street in front of -

Irwin: Yes, before that one.

Bill: - the, what used to be, or I guess today is the headquarters of the Board of Education when it was at Tweed Courthouse.

Irwin: It was down in that area?

Bill: Yeah. And I believe that's where the rally was. So, you know, I know internally within the union there was some debate as to what the response should be to the fiscal crisis, you know. That's another story, including a push by Israel Kugler's caucus at that time, to push for a one or two-day strike. It's something which I believe was voted down pretty overwhelmingly in the delegate assembly. And clearly I was part of that sentiment that thought that there should be more militant action.

I don't rehearsal [remember] all the arguments now, for and against it, but that's where I was, you know, certainly in 1975 at the time of the fiscal crisis.

Irwin: Okay. Well, that issue was settled in the election of 1976 -

Bill: Right.

Irwin: - in union election when Kugler ran against Irwin Polishook would now [to decide who would] replace Belle Zeller as the head of the other caucus and Irwin won by a significant amount, 58 percent and Kugler then disbanded his caucus and most of the members of that caucus joined the, now, Polishook Caucus -

Bill: Right.

Irwin: - and it became one caucus and was not challenged in election until the 1990's, which we'll get to in a just a moment, but I think your role in the union declined at about that point. Is there a reason for that?

Bill: Probably several reasons for it. One, I got married in 1976 and starting raising a family. Of course, that by itself is not a reason for dropping of a union. I mean, I was always active in the union, but I didn't run again as an officer. I served on the chapter's executive board until 1995.

I became also rather active in the community where I live with the Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition in the 80's and 90's and was this was kind of an Alinsky-style organization dealing mainly with housing issues, but other issues, including issues of drug dealing and, you know, how to combat that.

I was president for a while. The Northwest Bronx Community and Clergy Coalition was made up of 10 or 12 constituent community organizations. I was president of my local one for a while. And then in the 80's I became very involved with the American Social History Project in terms - dealing with pedagogical issues. So that's what kind of the focus of my energy was until 1995. And at whatever point you want I can go into, you know -

Irwin: Okay. Well, in -

Bill: - why I jumped back in.

Irwin: Beginning in 1990 at LaGuardia Community College when John Hyland won an election there representing an opposing caucus, which I think at that time was called New Directions.

Bill: It was.

Irwin: From that point on through the rest of the 1990's a second caucus developed called the New Caucus. You eventually became a member of that - a leader of that. What were the issues that led the New Caucus to organize in opposition to the Polishook Caucus, now called the City University Union Caucus (CUUC) and what was your role in the New Caucus?

Bill: Well, I was certainly one of the founders of the New Caucus. And at the time the New Caucus had a founding convention on December 2, 1995. I'm holding in my hand the draft platform of the New Caucus that I helped write. And I also helped to write the constitution of the New Caucus - actually [it] was written in my dining room with Steve London and Alberta Grossman.

And you probably know some of this history. I mean, there had been rumblings of dissent. John won an election as chapter chair at LaGuardia - what did you say, 1990?

Irwin: 1990.

Bill: 1990. A couple of years later Steve London won an election at Brooklyn College. And in 1995 I won election as chapter chair, which we'll talk about maybe in a couple of minutes -

Irwin: Yeah.

Bill: - at BMCC. And our main concern was that we didn't think that the [CUUC] Caucus, no - because you were a member of the CUUC Caucus, so you might disagree with this.

Irwin: Yes, I was, though it's interesting to hear your take on it since it'll bring me back to my own opinions of that time.

Bill: Well, let me just read you something and I'm not going to read from the draft platform, but from a little promotional sheet that went with it that said, "A vision for positive leadership: We must have a union that embraces, educates and mobilizes it's memberships, that widens the circle of resistance to the cuts, that draws on it's members ideas and skills, that enfranchises part-time faculty and staff, that speaks to the diversity of the instructional staff, while forging unity and purpose; that defends CUNY by linking faculty professional staff to students and communities and the larger labor movement and that makes full use of all the organizational and financial resources at it's disposal

We need union leadership which understands that when there is the organized political will to do so reality, no matter how grim, can be altered by human agency."

And that's one of the things that we kind of wore as a badge, you know, this [whole] thing about human agency. We thought that PSC had not - under CUUC leadership had not paid enough attention to organizing at the grass roots. The leadership of the CUUC Caucus I thought, and I will just speak for myself - I thought was very skilled, but, you know, whether this characterization is fair or not, I still think it's fair, relied mainly on - I mean, basically told membership let us do the driving.

We'll negotiate in your interest. It's kind of a service model of unionism. Unions should provide that service and have skilled negotiators. We thought that the PSC needed to do much more, particularly at a time at the end of the first Cuomo administration and the beginnings of Pataki years of governorship that the university was under fierce, fierce attack.

Of course there was the threat of cutbacks in '95. I believe that, correct me if I'm wrong, but I believe 1995 is when UFS [University Faculty Senate] and the PSC brought suit in court and initially got a favorable decision around the power of the Board of Higher Education to mandate cuts, so it's in that context that the New Caucus was organized.

I must say somebody who had a big influence - I mean, both Steve and John had a big influence on my thinking. And John, you know - I mean, I still hear his words ringing in my ears today just saying are we're nuts? You know, we consider ourselves progressive and we're not actively organizing in the union. You know, I mean, here's an institution, you know, that has [a] large membership. It's the only institution, really, that represents all the faculty of the City University, no matter what you might say about the University Faculty Senate.

It's got immense resources. You know, it's got connections to unions all around the country and, of course, its part of the larger, you know, American Federation of Teachers and New York State United Teachers. And I think what was a hallmark of the New Caucus was really organizing from the bottom up. I don't mean to, you know, romanticize, you know, doing bottom up. I mean, you need good top-down leadership combined with movement from the bottom, but I think the reason that we were eventually able to win in 2000 was that we won chapter elections. That's where we did our initial organizing.

Not only the first three, but eventually Queens College where Barbara Bowen became chapter chair, CCNY, where Gary - what's it?

Irwin: Benenson.

Bill: Benenson became chapter chair. Baruch, where Cecelia McCall became chapter chair and I believe there were others. And so in 1997, we mounted our first campaign for community-wide leadership in the PSC fully expecting to lose and hoping to get 35 percent of the vote. I think we did get 35 percent of the vote.

Irwin: Just about. Yeah.

Bill: You know, as I go back over the campaign literature, you know, I think might have done things differently, but I don't think it would have made a huge difference in the outcome. And then we ran again in 2000 thinking that we had a good chance to win.

It certainly wasn't in the bag. It might have been different if Irwin Polishook had not stepped down as PSC president and he had been the candidate rather than Richard Boris. You know, I know Richard, but Richard ran a horrible campaign - just horrible campaign. I mean, he was kind of gift to us.

Irwin: He alienated some of his own supporters, which is a no-no in any campaign.

Bill: And I think because, you know, that chapter organization that we had we were able to prevail in winning the senior colleges and the community colleges. We did not win the professional staff, although I think that vote was pretty close, but we won the four principles offices and the vast majority of -

Irwin: So that 2000 election was essentially an open seat, since Richard Boris was, I think, president for two months. Irwin resigned, I believe it was February of 2000. Richard was the vice-president, so he became president, so for two months he was president, but it was essentially an open seat.

Bill: It was essentially an open seat. And also I wouldn't want to be the person on the CUUC slate debating with Barbara Bowen. I mean, Barbara, I think as you know, is a very skilled debater - very quick on her feet. And, I mean, it's interesting. I mean, Boris just made a number of mistakes and misstatements during the 2000 election.

It's interesting that after the fact, I won't mention any names, a number of PSC staff - I did the Website for the New Caucus. And on it we [were] always quizzes - you know, kind of humorous quizzes - kind of poking fun at Boris. And they were all really titillated by this. So I think even in the office there was some discontent with Richard. And the election was pretty close, as I remember.

Irwin: Yes. It was about 54 to 46 -

Bill: Right. Which was, you know, I mean, a dissent -

Irwin: - or maybe 52 to 48. It was quite close.

Bill: Yeah. It was quite close, but if it was 54 to 48, 8 percent is still a nice margin. It was a big margin in the senior colleges. We won the community colleges, but it was much, much closer and I think it was pretty close among professional staff, CLT's and -

Irwin: That's what I wanted to ask you about because this goes back, not only to that election, it goes back through the 90's as the New Caucus was winning chapter elections and I think you're right they had won all the big, senior colleges by 1997, but they didn't win the community colleges. And now since you come from a community college I wonder if you have any thoughts about why there was that dichotomy through the 90's in the efforts of the New Caucus.

Bill: It wasn't lack of trying. I mean, of course, we won LaGuardia, we won BMCC. I don't know. He was never a member of the New Caucus if Jerry Meyer was still chair at Hostos Community College.

Irwin: I don't think he was.

Bill: I don't think he was, but also had a pretty small faculty, number of faculty, and professional staff at that time. So the three places which were really tough nuts for us to crack were Bronx Community College, Queensboro Community College and Kingsborough Community College. And I would characterize them, you know, and maybe this isn't the most [friendly] of characterizations, but it's my characterization and I think the way a lot of people in the New Caucus saw it is that the leadership, the CUUC leadership, were also the same people who pretty much ran the faculty senate.

And a lot of them were department chairs. And I just remember, you know, going to Kingsborough, going to Queensborough - I don't know if ever went up to Bronx, but I know people went up - actually, I did go up to Bronx - that there was a good deal of fear there in terms of people coming out and declaring for the New Caucus. In '97, I mean, things were a little more favorable than 2000.

So, I mean, I think that - and these three campuses had pretty sizeable faculty and probably made up something like 60 percent of the vote - I think community colleges. It wasn't after 2000 and I think Mary Anne Pita won the chapter chair position at Bronx. And I think this was maybe 2003, 2004 -

Irwin: It was after 2003.

Bill: - but it was certainly after 2000. The New Caucus never won a chapter chairmanship or chairperson at Kingsborough Community College to this day and things did certainly change at Queensborough, but, again, that wasn't really until, you know, several years after the 2000 election.

Irwin: Actually, the chair at Kingsborough was Rina Yarmish who ran in 2006 -

Bill: I think.

Irwin: - against Barbara Bowen in the general PSC election -

Bill: Right.

Irwin: - and lost by a substantial amount.

Bill: Yeah. I think it was closer than one would have expected because I think at that time there was still - a contract had not been signed.

Irwin: Yes. Yeah, maybe it was closer. That's right. It was closer. I was confusing it, in my mind, with the 2009.

Bill: Yeah. 2009 was not particularly close at all.

Irwin: Not at all close. That's right. It was closer than it should have been considering the poor campaign that she ran and the fact that it surfaced - that the group she headed surfaced a couple of months before the election instead of having built the way the New Caucus did -

Bill: Right.

Irwin: - a ground - a presence at the chapters. And she just came out of nowhere and ran for president in 2006. So it's quite different than the New Caucus.

Going back to the New Caucus in the 90's did you see a connection between the people and the ideology of a New Caucus and Is Kugler's caucus back in the 70's?

Bill: Tangentially, I mean, with the - I mean, a number of people who were active in the New Caucus weren't around CUNY in the 70's when -

Irwin: Steve London was not.

Bill: - Steven London was not. Barbara definitely was not. I don't think Cecelia was. John started teaching, I think, in '71 or '72, so John might have been around. I mean, I certainly was around. Jim Perlstein was certainly around. So - Bart Myers was certainly around. I forgot about Bart.

And those of who were around, you know, were certainly more sympathetic with the Kugler Caucus than with this Zeller – Polishook Caucus. When I say tangentially, know, I mean, these were people - you know, I just mentioned, you know, the late Bart Myers. I mean, these were people who were active around lots of CUNY issues in the 90's, you know. There was this lawsuit that Bart and Jim and Cecelia were part of. There was the organizing around tuition increases, the marches, you know, on Cuomo and Pataki's New York offices, which were fairly substantial. You know, these were big marches supported by the PSC, I believe.

Irwin: Yes.

Bill: So, and that's where kind of the core of activists was drawn from. I mean, that's where people kind of knew one another, you know, from.

Irwin: Okay. In the 90's you then became chapter chair at BMCC again and I think there's no surprise that there was another issue with the president this time.

Bill: Well, let's go back actually to the election of '95 -

Irwin: Okay.

Bill: - if I could I talk about that -

Irwin: Sure.

Bill: - because, you know, I'm going to speak a little bitterness here in terms of what happened in that election. Jim Perlstein and I, and then we recruited a woman, Olivia Cousins, an African-American woman who was in the health and physical education department, decided at the last minute to run as independents. And partly, you know - I mean, Jim and I were friendly with John Hyland. John didn't twist our arms to run, but encouraged us to do it and then all of a sudden we just decided one night that we were going to do it and we did it.

And it was kind of a bitter campaign. The man who was chair at the time was Percy Lambert of the CUUC Caucus. I won that election by not very many votes, but I won. Jim ran as a delegate and got more votes than anybody else as a delegate, but, you know, it wasn't an overwhelming victory. And Olivia and Toby Ginsberg, from the CUUC Caucus, were tied with 109 votes each for the position of secretary.

I mean, one of the things that I did - I mean, I certainly did my homework. I came down to the PSC when it was on 43rd Street and researched just how many delegate assembly meetings Percy Lambert had attended, Joe Picon had attended and Emily Anderson, who was in my department, had attended. Of 23 meetings, Emily attended zero. Of 23 meetings, Joe and Percy each attended seven. And of course, we publicized that.

What really got us to run was something that happened - well, I guess we had decided to run before this, but something that happened in March of '95 when BMCC, like other colleges, was being threatened with layoffs. It was at the time of the UFS/PSC lawsuit. I don't know if it had been filed yet or not, but that was years - that's the period.

Percy called a meeting of the chapter. Like, 200 people attended, where the purpose of the meeting was to hear from the president of the college, the acting president of the college at that time, Marcia Keyes. I think they [she] later became acting president of Bronx and eventually president at York and basically she was following orders from 80th Street and made it clear that there were going to be substantial layoffs and that certain departments might even be dissolved.

And after she finished and left, people said, well, the PSC chapter has to discuss, you know, like, what our response is going to be. And Percy said, and he really antagonized a lot of people - he said this is my meeting. No, this is it. And left without calling for an adjournment. Well, 80 people stayed and discussed what should happen.

And then it's after that that we ran our campaign. And during the campaign there were a lot of accusations directed at Olivia that basically running a program in the physical and health education department that she got total release [time], which she didn't. She got release time from half of her classes and [opponents also charged that she] hired scab labor people who were not union members - all of them were union members. And not only was there an attack in the CUUC literature, but in the official PSC chapter newsletter, which was edited by a guy named Donald Jenner. I don't know if you knew Donald or not.

Donald was an adjunct. Thought very highly of himself and he always had a column in there - Rumors and Humor. And he said rumor has it - and then he leveled these accusations at Olivia, which just infuriated me - just infuriated me. And these [charges] were repeated in the campaign literature.

So Olivia and Toby were tied at 109 votes each. There was a contested vote and the contested vote was Donald Jenner, who was on the - we originally given a list of all the full-timers and adjuncts who were eligible to vote. Donald Jenner was not on it. Donald Jenner was also an adjunct at Queensborough Community College and that's the college that he chose to be his primary college.

So at the American Arbitration Association, obviously, you know, when his ballot was about to be opened we said no, you know, and they held it back. That weekend, Shirley Beheshti, who I had never met before in my life, called me up and she said, don't repeat this, I will deny it. She said, but Donald Jenner should not be allowed to vote. She said, but people were putting pressure on me to count his vote. And his vote was counted and Toby became secretary.

Despite that, there were a number of good people. I mean, our argument really was with Percy's leadership. There are a number of very good people on the CUUC slate and, of course, their positions were uncontested for the most part.

Irwin: Why did you choose to run as an independent rather than -

Bill: Because it was too late to put together a slate. We decided literally at the last minute.

Irwin: But, no, you didn't run as a New Caucus group?

Bill: No, we did not as a New Caucus group. And at that point there wasn't a New Caucus. New Caucus was formed December, later that year. This is, I don't know when petitions had to be in - probably March, right, depending on when the election was.

Irwin: They - yes, they usually have to be in - March is the period of campaigning -

Bill: So, it's usually March 1st -

Irwin: - and April [unintelligible 00:50:05].

Bill: - you know, or something like that.

Irwin: Certainly.

Bill: And we decided - I mean, if that was the case we decided at the very end of February and very hastily, you know, circulated petitions, got enough signatures and we're on the ballot. And then a fourth person ran as a write-in candidate.

Irwin: Was interesting on that point about the newsletter I believe at that time and maybe to this day all newsletters had to be approved by the central union -

Bill: That's why I was so infuriated. I mean, I have the newsletter right here. I mean -

Irwin: - and it was -

Bill: - I can show it to you.

Irwin: It was policy and Arnold Cantor was very sticky about this. He went through every one of them.

Bill: Right. That's what amazed me about this is that I knew -

Irwin: Without all of that -

Bill: - newsletters -

Irwin: - stuff because he felt the union would be liable -

Bill: Absolutely.

Irwin: - the central union.

Bill: You know, I was just amazed that that was in there. And, of course, once we complained about it, I mean, obviously in subsequent issues, you know, there wasn't this stuff. And then I won the chapter election.

Irwin: Right. Right. Okay. Well, then you came into office and you had to deal with President Perez.

Bill: Oh, boy.

Irwin: And this was in some ways a repeat of the the 1970s with Edward Draper, but I'm sure it was also quite different.

Bill: Yeah. It was different. I don't know how I would characterize - I mean, Draper was a bit of a buffoon and I think was more into the perks of the position and he clearly had skim [skimmed] some money from the funds of the student fees. I don't think Perez was, you know, obsessed with the perks of the position, but it's interesting what - I mean, I was elected - I guess, certified in May. The board announced that a new president was appointed in June or July, two months later.

I remember at Jim's [Perlstein] urging - and Jim and I, you know, certainly in the 70's, 20 years earlier, wouldn't have done this. We were much more sectarian and, you know, Jim said, you know, you really should get his phone number in New Haven. He was head of a two-year college in New Haven and call him up, you know, and welcome him to the college, you know. And said, you know, obviously, we were going to have some things that we agree on in terms of defending the university and clearly labor management, we're going to have things that we disagree on, but, you know, call him up and say, you know, we're really looking forward, you know, to working with you and having a productive relationship.

And I did that. And I actually talked to him for about 30 minutes on the phone. And then, boom, as soon as he came in he made clear that he was going to reorganize the college and that he was going to do away with two departments. And, as you know, tenure is in your department. So you can actually go after tenured faculty by doing away with a department.

So in early November he announced that he was going to do away with - it was a combined health education/physical education department. He was going to move the physical education courses so that they wouldn't be credit bearing to the student life department and that he was going to move the health education courses to other departments, mainly the social science department. And then the cooperative education program - and BMCC had a really good cooperative education program,

you know, where obviously they placed people in jobs - you know, internships and what have you, you know, as they work to get degrees in some of the college's career programs.

And I remember meeting with him, you know. I think this was just before Thanksgiving when we found out what was happening. One of the things you could always do with Perez was meet with him. You know, so I called for a meeting immediately the Monday after we got back from Thanksgiving recess. And I just - oh, God, I mean, he was just impossible.

And so he went ahead with this and also made clear, you know, that - this is also at the time of, you know, the lawsuit that the larger PSC was bringing. He made clear that he was going to make the decision and he didn't care what the curriculum committee of the BMCC senate had to say on this or when it went before the whole faculty said.

You know, and, I mean, obviously [a] president has a lot of power, you know, but at least you go through the process, right, and then you say, well, I've vetoing this plan and I'm sending a different plan to the board. So he went ahead and we developed a whole bill of particulars against him, which was kind of a draft vote of no confidence. And I think we went about it really the right way and I think in a really good way.

I mean, certainly what Jim and I realized is that we were a head of a union chapter that was split between us and CUUC, although people worked well together. You know, I mean, there were - the CUUC people who were part of our chapter leadership - and, well, maybe one the reasons we worked well is that for the first time we had monthly executive committee meetings.

And what we decided we would do is set-up kind of an ad hoc structure outside the PSC where we would try to, you know - clearly, it was with union membership where would try to meet with faculty and professional staff throughout the college. And so we would have these once-a-week meetings, you know, where 30 or 40 people would attend. And that's how this draft document came for the vote of no confidence.

Then on April 26, 1996 the faculty - we petitioned for a faculty meeting. The faculty voted no confidence in Perez 80 to 33, with 11 abstentions, with a technicality. They claimed that we had one fewer - one too few people for a quorum and hence the Board [of Trustees] did not recognize the vote of no confidence, but it was a pretty overwhelming vote of no confidence.

The second thing we did is then we put together weekly meetings that involved Irwin Polishook Sandy [Cooper] - I had a [unintelligible 00:57:29] - why am I blanking out on Sandy's name?

Irwin: It'll come to me also.

Bill: I'm having another senior moment here.

Irwin: You're lacking a very important person's name.

Bill: Actually, I have a letter here that she wrote. Sandra Cooper.

Irwin: Cooper.

Bill: Right. We came up with it at the same time. Okay. Sandy Cooper.

Irwin: Same time. Sandy Cooper.

Bill: And, of course, it's kind of typical senior moments. You know, rather than go on saying, all right, we'll remember the name later we both had to spend two minutes -

Irwin: Right.

Bill: - you know, drilling deep to try to find that name.

Irwin: We did come up.

Bill: And we did come up with the name - Sandy Cooper and then members of both the departments. And we met every week. And then all of sudden I found out that a deal was reached - that Irwin Polishook at the behest of Phil del Castro from - he was chair at that time of the health education/physical education - had negotiated a deal where health education would remain a department. Physical education - most of those people lost their jobs.

Co-op education would be disbanded and people would be spread among other departments. And I was just furious [at Polishook]. I mean, it's one thing - I mean, if you only had come and said, look, it's come to this and clearly you can't have 20 people in a room negotiating and we would have said fine, but I was really, I must say, quite upset by that.

And so only half of the physical ed/health department remained. Co-op was disbanded. And I thought that we acted pretty professionally just in terms of involving as many people as possible - trying to make this a collaborative effort. And in the end, you know, maybe that's all that could've happened in terms of what could have been saved, but it was kind of bitter moment as far as I was concerned. Anyway -

Irwin: Okay. Did Perez remain as president through this entire -

Bill: Perez -

Irwin: - set of events?

Bill: - is, I believe, the longest standing - he's still president.

Irwin: No. He's still president.

Bill: Still president of the BMCC and Perez, you know, is also still - maybe not as difficult as he was in the late 90's, but, you know, the BMCC chapter still has lots of problems with Perez. Perez hired a labor designee, oh, I forget his name, lawyer, who was just impossible. I mean, you'd heard of the previous labor designee and name that you'll recognize, Howard Prince -

Irwin: Oh, yes.

Bill: - was labor designee at BMCC and while Howard could be very tough Howard was a pleasure to deal with. And also one of the difficulties in dealing with Howard is that he knew much more about the grievance process than we did. Thank God he's working for the PSC -

Irwin: Right.

Bill: - right now, but, you know, I mean, with Howard we could have productive discussions. That changed rather rapidly. So, and - yes, and Perez has been president - it's going on his 21st year.

Irwin: Okay. Okay. In 2000 the New Caucus won the general election and you became part of the PSC general leadership. You served as webmaster.

Bill: I did.

Irwin: Now, could you tell us a little about that because I think the website has - and, of course, technology is very important today, but I think the PSC website has been a very important part of the union's work in recent years.

Bill: You know, I would like to think so. And it's won a number of awards, including, you know, two rather prestigious awards this past year and number of years it was - won awards for best website for larger unions from NYSUT and one year one from the AFT.

I mean, the person who built the first website was Fred Phillip. Manfred was - he's on Travia right now. The last couple of years he's been chapter chair at -

Irwin: Lehman.

Bill: - Lehman College. He was at one time the chair of the University - the Citywide - CUNY-wide University Faculty Senate and he created a website in the late 90's. It's kind of by accident that I came to this work. I mentioned before that I did a lot of work on pedagogy with the American Social History Project and one of the things that the history project did is that they really pioneered bringing primary source materials to digital media, you know, first producing a number of award winning CD's and then creating, you know, some rather elaborate websites with - they paid a lot of attention not only to making primary source material available, both text, moving and still imaging - not both - well, both moving and still image and text and audio.

And so from them I kind of learned an [and] appreciated - you know, what the power of the web could do and what it couldn't do and for many years I taught teaching with technology courses as BMCC and I don't see technology as a - there are things that you can do with it that really enhance teaching and there are things that you can't do with it.

And I'm still a big believer, you know, in the old fashioned, you know, face-to-face teaching, but I learned how to build websites for my courses. And so in 2000 I told the New Caucus, you want a website? We can have a New Caucus website. I'll create one for you. And it was kind of fun to do and I think played a minor role in the election. As I said before, it certainly titillated some staff members of the PSC.

So, yes, you know, I played a role in creating the website - pretty much ran it on my own without too much supervision, I might add, for 12 or 13 years. The leadership was much more focused on print media and the Clarion, I think as well they should have. So, I mean - and they trust me. You know, anything was controversial I always checked with them before I posted anything. If something was just matter-of-fact, no, I didn't waste their time before I posted it and, you know, I think the website has been built up. The website is now - I'm still technically the web master, but it's really a committee of four or five people and it's a huge website with hundreds and hundreds of pages and Naomi [Zauderer] is the deputy executive director [with staff responsibility for the website.]

And three or four other staff, you know, meet regularly with me to, you know, assess what goes on the website and what doesn't go on the website and now we're in the process of moving, actually, to a new platform, so there are going to be some changes in the website hopefully by the end of this month. So, yes, I, you know, played that role.

Irwin: Good. Okay. And finally, we come to the fact that you are a retiree.

Bill: Well, let me just - I want to talk, if I can, just for four or five minutes -

Irwin: Sure.

Bill: - about BMCC post-9/11 because I think it's a pretty important story.

Irwin: Oh, okay. Please, I missed that. Yes.

Bill: That, obviously, on September 11th, 2001, BMCC was the college that was most directly affected. We lost a building when parts of World Trade Tower #7 fell on Fiterman Hall - ripped off the outer skin and part of the building and then contaminated - you know, I mean, just a little contamination from just the entire 911 site. It made -

Irwin: Maybe you ought to mention that BMCC is very close to the -

Bill: Yes.

Irwin: - Ground Zero.

Bill: Yes. Fiterman Hall, which was kind of - it's two or three blocks south of the main campus. The main campus is on Chambers Street between Greenwich and West streets on Chambers, maybe three or four blocks north of the World Trade Center. Fiterman Hall is right at the edge of the World Trade Center and it was right next to World Trade #7, which also collapsed for reasons that we don't - I think - for what we know today, but at any rate it destroyed a classroom building that serviced thousands

of students, so as a result, 21,000 to 22,000 students were crammed into a building that was on Chambers Street that was originally built to house about 6500 people - that's including faculty and professional staff.

And not only that, I mean, obviously, the building was partially contaminated because of its closeness to the World Trade Center. And then, in addition, by November of 2001 they dredged part of the Hudson River right opposite the college and that's where all the debris from the World Trade Center was brought to be put on barges and I guess to be moved to Staten Island to a dump there.

And there were serious problems with contamination there. So I was - Jane Young was the chapter chair. She only agreed - I was the one who twisted her arm to run. She only agreed to do it if I would be her vice-chair. So what our chapter faced was what to do with, you know, the issue of contaminants as of result of 911. And rather quickly working with the Health and Safety Committee of the PSC, and I think Joan Greenbaum played a pretty big role in this, we contacted Dave Newman at NYCOSH and then had NYCOSH do a walkthrough of the entire building and an inspection of the ventilation system with the administration at BMCC.

The administration was very cooperative and at that point, I believe, Ron Spalter. And BMCC had actually done a number of things right in terms of closing down the ventilation system, you know, just hours after 911, but BMCC was used by emergency services and the fire department as kind of a headquarters for a couple of weeks. And the college was closed for about a month. So there were real issues with contamination. And then the PSC chapter also pushed for a federal agency, NIOSH, National Institution of Occupational Safety -

Irwin: And Health.

Bill: - and Health - Safety and Health, to do a survey. They had already done one at Stuyvesant High School across the street in terms of mainly what the psychological impacts were on faculty/professional staff, clerical and maintenance staff and that happened.

So as a chapter we were pretty much on top of the issue of 911 contamination. At the same time the infrastructure of the college, mainly its escalators and elevators, pretty much collapsed because they had not been maintained properly. This is prior to 911. At one point I think of 20 escalators 18 of them weren't working. It's a six-floor building. None of the four elevators were working and 80th Street [CUNY Central Administration] didn't do much. And at that point - and I played, I think, the key role in this, you know, just saying, we've got to get thousands of signatures on petitions and go to Alan Dobrin, you know, vice chancellor at CUNY Central Administration and I guess in charge of facilities and what have you and just make clear that we're going to make a big issue of this.

Within a month we had 5600 signatures on petitions. Dobrin agreed to a meeting, which we had - first of all, Dobrin agreed to come down and tour the building with us, which he did. And then we met with him in his office and we had a number of demands, all of which were met, you know, mainly that they do temporary fixes to these escalators - not so easily done, but they have money in place to do permanent

replacement to all of them and that we have access to his office throughout to make sure that this is happening and he agreed to all of it.

And I think that was, you know, another example of kind of working at the grass roots, mobilizing faculty and professional staff and students in this instance - very important. I mean, Dobrin was particularly embarrassed by the fact. I mean, we had these stories, you know. One was a Bosnian student who was a double amputee, had lost both his legs in a land mine, accident during the wars in the early 90's, and, obviously, was confined to a wheelchair. Kind of amazing how he manipulated in this wheelchair - so when all this went down, you know, I mean, he couldn't get to classes.

Before it went down, because certain escalators weren't working and elevators weren't working, he had to go from the north end of the building, go down the elevator to the street, go to the south end of the building, take an elevator up and then the Office for Students with Disabilities was on the 6th floor - it's a six-floor building.

And then, you know, so, again, we collected stories from pregnant women, you know, who had to climb up six flights of stairs to get to the Office of Disabilities.

Irwin: It must have been a quiet office.

Bill: Right.

Irwin: No one could even get there.

Bill: And certainly Dobrin, you know -

Irwin: How long did it take to restore reasonable service?

Bill: Pretty quickly. I mean, they started working almost immediately on the escalators and temporarily repaired the ones that were most used, particularly at the south end of the building. That's where most students entered on Chambers street and the building extended six blocks all the way up to North Moore Street.

So that took about a year. The elevators were repaired rather quickly and then really kind of accelerated. We didn't expect it to be this fast, you know. They first started, I think, rebuilding the escalators in the north end of the building - not used as much. When those were finished they changed the entrance to the building to the north while they worked on the southern end of the building and within two years, which sounds like a long period of time, but, you know, when we researched this stuff that was pretty quick in terms of -

Irwin: Yes. Escalators take a lot of work -

Bill: Right.

Irwin: - to repair. Did you rent space to make up for the lost classrooms in Fiterman Hall?

Bill: We did rent space on - about two blocks south of Chambers Street - I forget the street. And then couple of years ago Fiterman was rebuilt and reopened and, you know, it's -

Irwin: There was a ceremony at the time.

Bill: Right. This modern building, you know, again, right opposite the World Trade Center. So in that sense the college is kind of whole again. And then the space - I mean, of course, we did our research, you know. The minimum space requirements under the board [CUNY Board of Trustees], you know, for faculty offices, of course, were violated tremendously.

Irwin: That was universal.

Bill: Yeah. No, that was universal. I mean, particularly that of BMCC. I mean, the other thing is that they kept on crowding students in the BMCC because I don't know if you know that funding for the community colleges, at least, is dependent upon, you know, how many students you have - how many paying students. And the money doesn't necessarily go to the colleges that have the most - all the money - that have the most students.

So BMCC was kind of a cash cow being located in Manhattan in terms of getting money into the coffers of CUNY. So the student population kept on going up year-by-year, you know, and before, you know, Fiterman was rebuilt - I mean, even with the additional rental space it was pretty ridiculous.

So you wanted to talk about the retirement -

Irwin: Yes. I want to conclude with that because you're now a retiree, as am I, and you [are the current chair of the retirees chapter.] want to have a share of the retiree's chapter. And so I just have, I guess, a general question. The retirees play a very significant role in CUNY. And I believe it's as significant as in any other union I know of in this country, so there's no question about that. Are you satisfied with the role that retirees have in the PSC and do you see the need for any changes in that role?

Bill: Well, as you know, you were kind of instrumental in making this happen. Was it nine years ago, 2006? When did retirees get representation on the PSC Executive Council?

Irwin: I don't know.

Bill: You were on that committee -

Irwin: Yes.

Bill: - as was I.

Irwin: I don't know exactly the year.

Bill: - We wrote -

Irwin: Larry Kaplan was gone. I was chapter chair, which was from 2000 to 2006, so it might have been at the very end of that time.

Bill: So - and, you know, I think - I know that's something that you pushed for. It's something that I've pushed for, too. I wasn't a retiree at that point when [we] were both serving on this on committee to re-write parts of the Constitution, but I think, you know, that's a big plus - retirees having two representatives on the executive council.

I don't [think] the retirees should have more. I mean, you know, right now, you know, the main business of the union is negotiating contracts. It's not the only business of the union - clearly not the only business of the union, unless we're teaching, you know, part time, you know, retirees are not covered by the contract - don't vote on the contract.

I think its right that active members - I think you know how I'm using the work active, not necessarily -

Irwin: In service.

Bill: In service. In service.

Irwin: Such a technical word.

Bill: In service members, right, should have, you know, greater representation. And I think it's also right that in-service have - their vote is weighted more heavily than, as you know, the vote of retirees. I think that's correct, but the point is retirees do have a vote, you know, for offices of the PSC. They do have a role on the executive council and I think because of -

Irwin: And the Delegate Assembly.

Bill: And the Delegate Assembly. I mean, you know, obviously, it's weighted there, too, where we have, I think, six delegates plus a chapter chair on the Delegate Assembly. If it was according to the formula that everybody else - that affects everybody else, we would have about 20 or 25, but nonetheless, I think six is fine. And I think, you know, by example of what we do we play a pretty positive role and I think a very positive role in the PSC.

And I must say, you know, some of my happiest years in the PSC have been really in the retiree's chapter. I retired in 2006. You were no longer chair at that point - Jack Judd was, but, you know, I started coming to retiree executive council meetings. I was certainly made welcome. In 2006 I could not run for a position on the retiree slate because I hadn't been a retiree for a year. And I really kind of marveled at how - I mean, of course, it's 15 years after the election of 2000, how members of both the New Caucus and people who were formerly in CUUC, you know, have worked really well together and what I really kind of enjoy about the retirees chapter is that it's leadership is really a collaborative effort I think more so than it ever was when I was at BMCC where I think there was a lot of collaboration.

And I'm saying this not because you're interviewing me, but I think that it was rather easy to kind of move into the chairmanship or chair person - however - whatever it is - politically correct here, of the retiree's chapter because of the work that Larry Kaplan and you and Jack Judd and Jim Perlstein did in terms of paving the way and that we have an executive committee that's willing to share the work - not just simply sharing the work, but also being part of the creative process in terms of how we step-by-step, you know, expand the reach of the retiree's chapter.

Irwin: Good. Okay. Well, I think this is the point in which I ask the standard question. What else would you like to discuss or have we discussed it all?

Bill: I think we pretty much discussed it all, you know. I won't give you my opinion about Donald Trump. I won't tell any Donald Trump jokes.

Irwin: Right. Well -

Bill: And I think we can leave it at that.

Irwin: Well, things always continue, but this is a good point at which I think we can draw to a close. So thank you very much, Bill.

Bill: And thank you, Irwin.

Irwin: Okay, bye.

[End of recorded material 01:22:50]