

John Hyland Interview by Bill Friedheim and Andrea Vásquez

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Bill Friedheim: Hello. Bill Friedheim and Andrea Vásquez are here at the Graduate Center on July 23, 2014, interviewing long-time community and union activist and union leader, John Hyland. So, John, why don't we start by having you tell us a little bit about your personal background, growing up, parents, family, town or city where you grew up? Given your background, are there any particular events or influences that shaped who you later became?

John Hyland: Okay. I was born in Brooklyn, and I had a brother and four sisters. But it was not quite that simple, because each of my parents had been married, and had, in my mother's case, three children, and my father, two. Their spouse died, so they married and reconstituted this joint family, and then I was the sole offspring of that marriage. So, in a way, I was the youngest of six, and in a way I was an only child. Because all my brothers and sisters were much older – my brother was 19 years older than I was – so, they were all out of the house, probably by the time I was 9.

So we lived in Brooklyn for about five years, then we moved to Queens. I grew up in St. Albans, went to public school for three years, and I went to Catholic school for four years, and then I went to an all-boy Catholic school in Brooklyn, Bishop Loughlin. Then I went into the seminary to study to become a Roman Catholic priest, so two years there – it was a day college in Brooklyn – and then I studied the last two years of college at an away seminary in Huntington. And then, for the four years of theology studies, I was sent to the Catholic University of Louvain in Belgium, so I was in Belgium, in Europe, from '59 to '63.

That had a big effect on me. In some ways, a turning point, I went from this Brooklyn, Queens kid, hanging out in the park and playing ball a lot and so forth, the next thing, I'm in Paris, you know. [laughs] The university itself was excellent. It was a very advanced, intellectual place and milieu, both in the secular subjects and theologically. I had a lot of free time, actually, when I was in Louvain it was in a seminary, which is very restricted, but I had three months off in the summertime, in which I was free to travel. And I had a motorcycle, and went all over the place for three summers.

And during that time, especially in France, I sought and met, I would say, the more progressive elements of the Catholic Church at that time. In particular, the Worker-Priests – there was a movement in the Catholic Church, had begun in the forties, where priests went to work in factories and farms and construction sites and so forth. So I met some of them, and others in that whole movement. Actually, it was very appealing, and I considered not

coming back. I considered staying in Europe. But then I was basically convinced to come back, and bring that back with me.

So, when I came back, after being ordained a Catholic priest, I had written to the Bishop and said I wanted to be in a Black or Puerto Rican parish, and he honored that. So, I spent five years in Bed-Stuy, four years in different parishes, and in the last year another priest and myself proposed, and the proposal was accepted, that we would leave parish work and we would live in an apartment, and not have parish religious responsibilities, but would simply do what we had been doing from the parish, which was organizing welfare recipient organizations and storefronts. So, we did that for a year, and the five years in Bed-Stuy, from '63 to '68, always felt it was like 20 years compressed into five. The degree of activity and the events that were going on were extraordinary, and had a very big effect on me. Both the activities and the people in Bed-Stuy.

Andrea Vásquez: Tell us what kind of effect they had on you.

John: Well, I began to do community organizing. I went from the traditional parish, priest work, with religious education, coaching sports teams, and doing religious services and so forth, to gradually trying to respond in a more social, collective way to the problems that existed in Bed-Stuy, which were obviously racism and poverty. Bed-Stuy is a complex community with many strata and layers, and so forth. In particular, it dawned on me – I had no training in this at all. I had certain ideas, when I was in Europe, the workers movement became real to me. It was all over the place, and I became friends with a lot of people who were in that world.

There was a woman who came to the rectory sometimes to get food help, and we had a system where we'd just write a ticket, and the woman could ask for x amount of money and the woman could take it to the local grocery store and get food. She came back a number of times. She always had problems with welfare, the checks didn't come, she got cut off, and there were all kinds of issues. I'd call up welfare and say: "what's going on, we need to do this." Fortunately, at that time, it coincided – [I didn't think it up myself] –with the beginnings of the welfare rights movement, which in some ways was brainstormed out or thought through by Richard Cloward and Frances Piven. So, there were beginning to be storefronts around doing this and the basic idea was that it was not just a series of individual problems, but it was a systemic problem of the welfare system itself.

So, I and other priests, and Catholic laypeople, got involved in all this stuff. I got some formation training, from the welfare rights movement, going to a lot of meetings, and so forth. This other priest and myself, (the guy with whom I lived in the apartment and worked with the storefronts), we went out to have a little bit of a tour. We went out to a conference in Kansas City, we came back,

we went to Chicago, we ran into [Saul] Alinsky people there, and then we went to Detroit. It was right after the riots. We came back, and then we invited the Alinsky organizer that we had met to come, to do a session, a three-day session, with us. That was good, because that began to give me a framework. Before we were just doing this stuff by the seat of our pants, and he gave us some sort of a framework out of which to work.

So I think that's some of the ways that I began to change. Gradually I was doing less and less religious work in the parish, and more and more community organizing work throughout the whole Central Brooklyn area. There was this sort of network of young priests who were all doing the same stuff throughout Central Brooklyn, from Fort Greene to Williamsburg, Bushwick, Bed-Stuy, Crown Heights, and so forth. We all hung out together, and we gradually began to shift – also, theologically. I began to have doubts and questions about authority and the teachings – birth control being the most prominent one. Well, that already happened when I was in Louvain, but it grew.

I became more and more angry, and more and more extreme, radical. (I'm not sure). I was reading Frantz Fanon, and Che Guevara, and, you know interacting with a much wider range of people than ordinary within the church context.

Bill: Were you reading this together with other people? Other priests? Other people in the movement?

John: The guy that I shared the apartment with. The last six months of the time, (I was only in the apartment for a year), we began to go to the New School. First we had gone for a non-credit course that Cloward gave on the welfare rights movement.

Bill: Why the New School? Because Cloward was there?

John: Yeah, that's right. We were going to a lot of welfare rights meetings, and then they said Cloward was giving a course on it, so we went to it. So that introduced us to the New School, and we said, this is interesting, maybe we could take some courses here. Not with a degree in mind, we just thought we'd take some sociology courses that would help us organize. So, we did, and we took one course in common and we each took a course separately, and then we'd come back and we did a lot of talking of the courses at the New School.

By that time, I was at the end of my rope with celibacy, and I didn't want to be celibate anymore. So I took what they call a leave of absence, it was not a complete break – you're just out of action for a while. And then, after about six months, I went back and said I want to make it complete. We did that.

Bill: Was this traumatic in any way, or was it just that you were gradually moving towards this decision?

John: I wouldn't say traumatic, but it was dramatic, maybe, in some ways. It was a big change. I mean, I prepared for eight years to do this, and then I did it for five years, so 13 years of pretty intense...

Bill: What prompted you initially to go into the priesthood?

John: That's a good question. I grew up in this Irish-American Catholic family, my uncle was a priest, one of my sisters became a nun. Our family was very practicing, very religious. It was a big thing. Through reading, and, I guess, living in that world, that reality seemed real, and it seemed to be a good thing to do. Within that world there's talk about a vocation, so God calls a person, you know. And I always had a hard time explaining that, I remember one time I was playing ball, and we're sitting around between innings or something like that, and I told the guys I was going to go to the seminary. And the guys said, wow, you got a call from God? You know, it was a very literal understanding, like it was a voice or something like that. I see it mainly in social psychological terms at this point.

Actually, I was trying to decide, back and forth, so I went away to a monastery for about five days, to sort of sort everything out. And I remember I made a column, *stay*, and a column, *leave*. [Laughs]. I laid it out like that, the *stay* column was about that big, and the *leave* column was about that big [laughs]. So, I decided I was going to leave. Right in the middle of that, Martin Luther King was assassinated. So when I got back to the apartment, – all hell broke loose. The big part was somewhat over, but it was still very tense.

Anyhow, so I left, and after a little while I met Patty, and we decided to get married. So then I had to go find a job, which I had never thought about very much. I was more programmed into the other situation. Somebody I knew from the community organizing stuff said, well, VISTA, the Volunteer Program [Volunteers In Service To America] is hiring people to train VISTAs in community organizing. So I said, I can do that. So I went –

Andrea: Year?

John: Summer of '68. So I went down to Washington. It was actually a private company that had to contract for VISTA to do the training. So from my point of view it was pretty good; it was more money than I had, certainly, as a priest. So I did that for about a year and a half – I did a series. There were six-week training programs, and you'd go with a group of 15 to 20 VISTAs, and you'd do sessions with them, you had them living in the community, and so

forth. And then at the end, you'd make a selection. You'd say some people should become VISTAs and some people should do something else.

So that was interesting. I was in rural Appalachian Pennsylvania for six weeks, I was in DC, I was out in Riverhead, I was in Bushwick with these training programs. By that time, Nixon had won the election, and the funding for these programs started to get cut back. So at a certain point we weren't getting new trainees. The contract was still in effect, so we were just coming to work and sit there all day with nothing to do. So I said, I'm not doing this. So a friend of mine had started to teach, another guy who had been a priest that left, he started to teach at Brooklyn College. So he said this is good, you read the books, you go in, you talk to the students about the books. So I said, I can do that. [Laughs]. As you can see, it was not a highly *What color is your Parachute* approach.

So, I go down to Brooklyn College. I had a Master's in religious education from Louvain, and I was just finishing up a Master's in sociology at the New School, because I had been continuously taking the courses.

Bill: And were you going fulltime to the New School at this point?

John: At night – I was taking two courses a semester, or something like that. So, I got a substitute line. Somebody was on sabbatical. It was four courses a semester, and it was all one course, four sections. It was Social Foundations of Education. So I did that for a year and a half. By that time, I had decided, I'll do this permanently. Patty and I said this is a decent life, I like the work, and it seemed like good work.

Bill: Did you have any connection, at that point, with any people who later became union activists or CUNY activists on CUNY-wide issues, at Brooklyn [College]?

John: I didn't have real contacts with them, but I became acquainted with them, I would say. Because during the time I was at Brooklyn College, which was probably '70, '71, the Vietnam War was still going on, and the Cambodian invasion, I think, took place during that time. And there was a strike, a student strike, at Brooklyn College; they shut it down for two or three weeks. And I participated in that. But Byron Morris was prominent in that, and Renate Bridenthal was visible, and Hoby Spalding, and some of those folks, who I got to know later on. So, then when I decided that I was going to do this permanently, I said, I should get a PhD. So, I took a year off, (Patty was teaching in a Catholic School), and finished all my coursework at the New School. And at the end of that, I passed the different tests you had to take and the language tests, so I was basically ABD [all but dissertation], and wrote my dissertation at that point. I started to look for a job, because by then Patty was pregnant with Paul. I looked for community organizing jobs, I looked for

college teaching jobs, and LaGuardia had just been instituted; it wasn't a reality. It was a legal reality, they had a president and administration, but they weren't getting buildings and hiring staff.

So, they had opened in the fall of '71. The first class had about, I think, 560 students. I'd say mostly, white, working class students from Woodside and Long Island City and Astoria. Some black and Puerto Rican students, eventually that shifted ... So I got an adjunct job teaching community control, in the summer of '72, and then that turned into – (you know, they were hiring), a fulltime job in the fall of '72 and I stayed there till I retired.

Bill: So what was LaGuardia like? It's just starting then, in 1972 – its mission, its faculty, its administration, its students.

John: It opened in '71, I became fulltime in '72. It had a very young president, Joe Shenker, who was younger than I was. He was 29 years old. He had connected, I think, with Alan Bowker, who was the Chancellor. He worked at Central Office for a while, he was interim president at Kingsborough for a very short period of time, and then he became the founding president of LaGuardia. He was a very open guy. He didn't seem to have a big ego, he worked – I'm sure it was very intense to start this thing up.

There was an atmosphere, at that time: this is going to be different. Open admissions had just passed in '69, I think began in '70, so this is [during the beginning of open admissions. LaGuardia was the last of schools that were basically instituted for open admissions. They could see this coming, In fact, the administration planned to do it anyhow; it got jumped time wise by the student strikes. The students at Brooklyn College in, the summer of '69, shut down the school, and so forth. Some of their demands were open admissions, black and Puerto Rican faculty – demands like that. So it got pushed up, but they were going in that direction anyhow. Bowker came from California, where they already had this tiered system with a big emphasis on community colleges.

So, they were thinking this is new, they were willing to experiment, to do things a little bit differently, and they hired people, who wanted to do different things. The faculty they hired were a lot of sixties faculty. So the faculty at LaGuardia, besides -

Bill: By sixties you mean out of the sixties movement?

John: Movement people, that's right. You know, Civil Rights people, SDS [Students for a Democratic Society] people, anti-war people, people who had experience in those movements. There were a fair number of them there, and there were more conventional academics and so forth, but it was a good place to be. There were a lot of people doing stuff outside, people were doing tenant

organizing, and so forth. And obviously there was antiwar stuff; the war was still going on. So it was very lively. We basically developed curricula, the pedagogy was different, it was a cooperative education college. It was defined as a cooperative education college, which meant a work-study college, which meant work internships. So that was a big chunk of the college, there was a whole division devoted to that.

The departments worked closely with them. There was a more integrated feel to it. Counselors, (there was a lot of remediation going on), so there were counselors, for remediation, basic skills people, there were the academic departments, and there were structures there by which we worked together. I think for one year the office space was divided in an interdisciplinary way, so there would be people from English, Social Science, and other departments, sharing office spaces. The grades were different. We didn't have A, B, C, D, we had E for excellent G for good, and P for passing. There was no F, there was no failure, it was – You had repeat. You had to do it again.

So, it was a lively place, and...

Andrea: You mentioned the activities of the students and the backgrounds of the faculty. How much activism involved both of you together? You mentioned students closed down the place for a while and faculty were antiwar.

John: Well, there was always a layer of students who also came in with some kind of movement or organizing experience. There were vets. Vets were very important; initially, Vietnam vets. I remember one of the people in my department took his class – (We had these courses called intensives, in which you'd have a week of experience, and then you'd have classes built on those experiences) This guy had – (I forget what the title of the course is – you could make up courses, pretty much whatever you wanted there for a couple of years). So this guy, he took his class to the Republican Convention in Miami.

We had courses like “Community Control.” I mean, it was right after the community control fights and so forth.

Andrea: Tell us about that class. What did you do, and why, and how?

John: Well, it was a class of school, paraprofessionals, mostly African-American women. I had been in Bed-Stuy at the tail end of that. I was leaving just as that [community control] broke, and I had a lot of friends in it on the side of the “community control people.” So I basically taught it from that perspective, and I tried to give a whole picture of it. I had a lot of materials, there were a lot of mimeographed stuff and flyers and I used to have a table in the back of the room with all that kind of stuff on it, besides the books.

Andrea: Did you bring in guests to speak to the students?

John: I'm trying to think. I think I did have some people who were connected to the various organizations.

Andrea: And did you see the – in those early years, did you see the nature of the student body change with open admissions?

John: There were no students before open admissions.

Bill: But you said when it began it was mainly white working class. Did that change?

John: That's right. There remained that population over the years, but the college doubled almost every year for a bunch of years. And the newer students were more African-American and Puerto Rican at that point. Gradually, then it became... as the Latino population diversified it became everybody, and then the African-American community became Caribbean and African and so forth. And now it's incredibly diverse. There are Polish and Lithuanian – I mean, there's extraordinary diversity there.

Andrea: How did you deal with the growth of the school doubling every couple of years?

John: Well, again, it was exciting, because there were always new programs developing, and new faculty being hired. See, I came in '72, and in '75/'76 was the fiscal crisis. So, bam, that was very different. That changed things, right?

Bill: How did it change things?

[00:29:29]

John: Well, the money was cut back, and that's when adjuncts really came into play. There had been some adjuncts initially, but not that many. And I remember a meeting at which Joe Shenker came into the faculty group and said, well, we're not going to have as much money as we had, but none of the fulltime faculty were going to be affected. And this was like a prize, if you will. "Look how good we are, we saved all the fulltime faculty jobs in the midst of this" But they did that by not hiring anybody else, laying off adjuncts, and then as the college continued to grow, increasing the number of adjuncts. When I got to the college, the union [Professional Staff Congress] had just, I think, been instituted, chartered.

Bill: '72.

John: There was a chapter there, and I don't know if I volunteered or was recruited to be on the chapter Executive Committee. I said, okay.

Bill: In the seventies you were on the Executive Committee?

John: Yeah, right away. Right away. There was a fellow, Don Davidson, who was the chapter chair there, and he was the chapter chair there for a very long time. It didn't particularly grab me. I went to meetings, but it didn't seem to be doing very much, especially with the fiscal crisis. I guess people at LaGuardia wanted to do something more in response to the fiscal crisis. I wound up going down to the PSC offices. There was this sort of rump group that went into the PSC and made noise and complained that we weren't doing enough, and so forth. And they sort of let that group function within the space of the union. So there would be all these meetings going on, and the leadership of the union was in their offices and they would send one guy – I think Meyer Asabi, [sp?] was sort of the go-between between the official leadership and this rump group.

Eventually, we got a pretty good protest, actually, down the street from City Hall against the cuts and so forth. It was Paul's first demonstration, I think, and I remember him being in a little wheeler, stroller. And the...The college was closed for two weeks, we were told to go to unemployment insurance, which we did sign up for –unemployment, but it opened back up again before I got there. I don't think I ever got an unemployment check. But they did... We didn't get money for those two weeks, but eventually they agreed to pay it out over a number of years later on. So, I think I took a job as a mailman for that period of time.

Bill: For those two weeks.

John: Yeah, yeah. And...

Bill: But this rump group, did you make contact with other community activists, or have any relationships that would last over a period of time?

John: No, I –

Bill: Or was that really later?

John: It was later. I met people who later on – I remembered that experience, but it wasn't somewhere I met them, connected, and we continued to be connected. When the fiscal crisis was over, I went back to LaGuardia. And then I got on the local community board. It was the time when the community board system was set up throughout the city.

Bill: The community board where you lived or the community board in Long Island City?

John: Both. Well, we lived in Woodside. We lived in an apartment in Woodside. So I was at LaGuardia and my residence was in community board two. So, I was involved in the community through the community board. From '72 when I started to about '80, I was mainly focused on LaGuardia, because it was building this institution. There were all these programs, and curriculum, and meetings and so forth. It was very intense. So I was on the P and B [Personnel and Budget committee] Then in '80, I ran for and was elected chairperson of the department.

Bill: Why did you decide to stand for Chair?

John: I was close to finishing my dissertation. My dissertation, actually, was on LaGuardia. It was a sociological study of the formation of an institution. So it was (about) LaGuardia from 1969 to 1979. And the title of it was "Challenge and Accommodation. Stratification and Conflict in a Community College" It was largely class and ethnicity based. And those ideas stuck with me. It was sort of the birth and early childhood of LaGuardia as an institution, and I saw certain developments, right? I saw the college initially as a place of challenge to the class structure and to racist structures. My conclusion was, that it gradually became less challenging and more accommodating to those structures.

Bill: Why and how do you think it did?

John: Partly because I think the funding changed. In a way, it was what Max Weber called a *routinization of charisma*, right? I mean, charisma, in Weber's theory, was an innovative force, right? But gradually it gets routinized. And it's an institutional process. An institution starts off with a certain energy, ideas, and needs. After a while, it takes on a life of its own, and it becomes more interested in preserving and maintaining itself. I see that across the board in many, many, many, if not all institutions.

Andrea: Bill touched on this earlier – What was going on in other locations? Were you aware of things happening at other places at CUNY? Wasn't the Newt Davidson Collective around that end of the fiscal crisis?

John: Yes. Yeah, I had that [Newt Davidson Collective publication]; I read that, I think I may have used it in class, even. Joan Greenbaum was there, so I think through her I knew a little bit about other aspects of what was going on there. And then...I got two...two fellowships, during that time. And one was with the NEH, National Endowment for Humanities Fellowship. It was neat. Herb Gutman proposed it, and it was about four people who got it. One of them was

Jim Pearlstein, so that's when my friendship with Jim started and evolved. It was great.

Actually, I had it in the eighties when I was chairperson. I was the chairperson for six years, and one of those years I got a sabbatical. A full paid sabbatical, which didn't exist, right? But with the money from the NEH, the college administration accepted that as paying for adjunct replacement for me. They were very accommodating and friendly to me. So I had this whole year off. So for part of it I did this seminar. And so I became a little bit more aware of CUNY beyond LaGuardia.

At some point during that time I also ran for and was involved in University Faculty Senate. So I started to go to some University Faculty Senate meetings. Which largely turned me off.

Bill: Why?

John: I found them not particularly related to the things that I was interested in and I thought was important. And I observed what, for me, was a lot of pomposity. A lot of people giving...We would call it speechifying. And I said, well, I don't think anything is happening here. So I did that for a while, and I stopped. I finally finished my dissertation and I got my PhD in '81. I had resisted it for many years, which is a whole story, but...So that's part of, I think, connected to why I decided to become the Department Chair. I thought – the guy who was Department Chair was starting to burn out, and I thought there were things the department needed to do, and could do, and so forth.

Bill: This was sociology? Social Sciences?

John: No, no, Social Science Department, it was –

Bill: Catchall.

John: It was a catchall. It was six disciplines: sociology, psychology, history, political science, economics and anthropology. Which was good. I mean, that was great for us, you know. Yes.

Bill: So you were talking about the department.

John: Yeah, it was...We wrote an interdisciplinary book together: "Work and Society", and each discipline had three chapters, and it was very much related to work because of the cooperative education nature of the college. We got a big Ford Foundation grant to work with Cooperative Education. Then I got a Mellon Fellowship. I got released on it to go to this seminar that Bill Kornblum did at the Grad Center, and I was focused on labor. There were

about 20 people in that, I think, and so I began to meet more people outside of LaGuardia. And the content of it was very interesting, also.

And then, the year that I had the sabbatical, which I think was like '83/'84, for half of that I worked one day a week at the Center for Worker Education. Because I decided I wanted to shift my focus to [Labor]. My focus had basically been the community – From my Bed-Stuy welfare rights experience. Labor ... I was sympathetic – probably more so from the European experience, but I was also critical of it. I was very aware that the construction trades were excluding people of color. I did pickets with Jim Horton and “Fight Back”, I think it was.

Bill: “Fight Back”, right.

John: And they'd picket construction sites, because there were no black workers. So I had real reservations and critique about labor unions. But then, I think partly through my studies...

Oh, one thing I forgot: When I left the priesthood, and I was part of an informal seminar that one of the people that I met through welfare rights organizing, a fellow named Ezra Birnbaum, who worked with MFY, and had been very much involved in the Mobilization For Youth – it was one of the big three anti-poverty programs in New York City. And they had really generated, in some ways, the welfare rights movement in New York City.

So Ezra was an old lefty, and he and Stanley Aronowitz did this informal seminar in Ezra's apartment in Chelsea. So Stanley was the main light. Ezra was very smart, he wasn't as book oriented as Stanley was, but – I remember reading *Monopoly Capital* by Baran and Sweezy, and that really changed my thinking a lot. It was a very good explanation of capitalism and so forth. So there were about maybe ten people who showed up pretty regularly at Ezra's, and Stanley was there often. And it was interesting. It was all white people, and it was this transitional period where white radicals were sort of rethinking – and being basically told go back to your own community by Stokely. Stokely Carmichael basically said get your own organizations. If you want to help the black movement you should organize in the white community. So this was sort of an attempt to move in that direction.

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Actually, we did some stuff out of that. We formed this little group project called Straphangers United and we fought against and opposed the raising of the [Subway] fare, from 15 cents to a quarter. And we did stuff on the Subway. I remember one time we went to the station at Woodside where we lived, about five of us, and we held the doors open. You know, the gates open. And we had flyers and we were like, “come on through”, you know. So I met one woman, actually, she looked, she put her token in and came through, and

she walked over to me and she said, “I agree with you, but I just couldn’t do it.” So, it was an example of the power of authority.

Anyhow, with this mélange of experiences and people and so forth, I began to move more towards labor. So then when the second term as Chair was over I decided I didn’t want to do that anymore, and so I didn’t run, and I decided to check out the PSC. So in ’87 I think there was a chapter election. I went to the chapter [chair] and I decided to get involved with the union again, so he put me on the slate. I think I was an alternate delegate to the delegate assembly, and I started to go to the delegate assembly meetings. I came to the conclusion that there wasn’t a whole lot going on, from my point of view.

Bill: Why did you come to this conclusion?

John: Well, I was at the meetings.

Bill: What was it about the delegate assembly—

John: Well, there were all kinds of things going on in the university, I mean, contracts and stuff like that, and there was no energy. It seemed to be very routine. I didn’t experience any fight. There seemed to be things that needed to be fought over, right? To be resisted, or changed. And I didn’t experience that there. But I learned a lot. I learned more about the university as a whole, I met people; I think I went on a lobbying trip up to Albany. I saw what was happening.

Bill: What years was this, more or less?

John: It was ’87 to ’90, basically. And then in, I think it was, probably ’89, I think Cuomo was the governor, and he had [implemented] tuition increases and cuts in his budget. So, students at LaGuardia and, I think, City and Brooklyn, and maybe other places, Hunter. But at LaGuardia the students shut down the place. I came to work one day and all the faculty is standing on the street, and on the sidewalk across the street, and –

Bill: Did you know this was coming?

John: No. And the police were there. They had stayed in the night before and then they had taken a lot of chairs and barricaded the entrances. They let people in to do the administration, so everybody got paid, and they didn’t antagonize people. But they shut it down. And faculty were like, you know, almost [with our thumbs in our mouths], you know. Figuring out what do and not to do and so forth. So, Larry Rushing and myself –called a meeting in the cafeteria in the building of LaGuardia across the street. And Larry Rushing and I, I think, co-chaired the meeting. And we said, well, you know, what are we going to

do, and we.. [wanted] to support for the students. Some faculty didn't like it, but the majority of the faculty –

Bill: A lot of faculty came to this meeting?

John: Yeah, oh, yeah. I mean, faculty were showing up every day, but they had no place to go, so we went into... We had buildings all over the place at that time. We had rented space, as the place grew. We rented space at various buildings. Basically, we voted to support the students and so forth, and then we were marching with them. So we did that.

And also, the obvious question was: Where was the union? Why were we having this ad hoc rump group doing this? We had a union. The union should've been doing it. And we never really got a sense of where the union was in relation to this. And the chapter chair, would give speeches out in front. The students would organize speeches and faculty could speak and so forth. He would speak, but he never organized anything. So my conclusion was that it was a front, basically. He wanted it to look like there was union support.

Bill: Were you and Larry and others actively working with the students?

John: Well, we certainly were. At that point, we knew the leadership. I think we had some of them in class, and so forth.

Andrea: And what were their demands?

John: Well, certainly they were against tuition increase and [budget] cuts. So, after that...

Bill: Let me just interrupt for one second. Was there any citywide stuff around...? This anti-tuition stuff?

John: Yeah. The students got together, the students were in touch with each other, and the students from those colleges that I mentioned, where things were going on, were in touch with each other. The faculty, I don't remember that, but I know...I'm not sure at what point – you would probably know better, the point at which faculty formed a group. It had a name. It may be CUNY Faculty and Staff United something like that, but the big thing that I remember them doing was a lawsuit that came out of, I think, an observation of Sheldon Weinbaum. He had read about a lawsuit down in the south where they challenged the relationship between the student populations in two colleges and their budgets.

Bill: Yeah. I believe it was Mississippi.

John: Yeah, right. So, anyhow, this faculty and staff group was very active, put together the suit, pushed it, and people I knew from LaGuardia were participants in it. I mean, I wasn't upfront of that group, but I went to some of the meetings, and I knew about it. So then in 1990, there was going to be a chapter election, and there was this negative feeling after the student business and the union not taking a position. So I spoke to a few people and I said I think we should challenge the leadership, you know, we should run.

Bill: Who were some of the people you talked to?

John: Well, Mike Frank was there. Gilberto Arroyo in my department. I think Nancy Erber was around then. Joan was there, but I don't remember her physically being there at that time. She may have been.

Bill: Joan Greenbaum, you're talking about?

John: Yeah, Joan Greenbaum. She may have been in Scandinavia or – she had many lectures and things like that in Scandinavia, I think, Denmark, and Sweden. In any case, she was certainly around or part of the group. The other thing was, there was [foment] in the labor movement, and there was...Within the UAW there was an insurgent group called "New Direction". Jerry Tucker was the guy who was the head of that, out in the Midwest. He won an election. So we decided to put together the slate, and we called it "New Directions". We put together a couple of flyers, and –

Bill: Did you run a full slate?

John: We ran a full slate. And ...

Bill: So you got more than just two or three people – you had 10 to 15 people on the slate?

John: Yes, yeah, right, we had a whole group. It was a good slate. It was diversified in various ways. And we won the election. And...

Bill: By much?

John: I think so, yeah. I don't think it was close.

Bill: And what were the cutting issues that you brought to people differentiating yourself from the CUUC Caucus?

John: Well, I think it was the lack of activity. I mean, when a contract would be settled, the chapter chair would call a meeting to explain the terms of the contract. People were often not happy with the terms of the contract, and would question him, and he really didn't have good answers. And so there

was a general dissatisfaction with the energy and the results of the union, I would say.

Andrea: And you mentioned CUUC – explain a little who they were. What does CUUC mean?

Bill: Yes, do you know what the acronym stands for?

John: Yes. City University Unity Caucus. It was the leadership group of the union that had existed forever, right? From the very beginning. Well, it's a little bit more complicated, I don't know if you want to go there or not, but anyhow. Eventually, it became the dominant caucus, and the leadership was reelected, and reelected, and reelected over and over again, ultimately for about 26 years. But at that time, it was the same chairperson. The fellow who was the chairperson in '90 had been the chairperson in '72, except he did step down. I thought I was going to run against him, and then, I think, after we put the slate together he stepped down and they put another guy up. An African-American guy.

I remember putting out a flyer and it was basically all questions. Do you know who the chapter leader is? Do you know when was the last chapter meeting? Do you know – I mean, I had all these questions that the obvious answers was no. We didn't know shit about what's going on, you know? So that was the thrust of it. And I remember, I was going to the delegate meetings, as an alternate delegate. So at one meeting, the secretary of the union as a whole comes down to me, and she says – I'm not doing this on my own – she said "Irwin [Yellowitz] asked me to tell you that he would like it if you didn't run in the chapter election." So I said, okay, you told me. That's it. Good. And that was the only little thing. There was no other big deal. That's the way they did things, I guess.

Bill: So what was different about the chapter once you took leadership?

John: Oh, well, I think people were glad, you know, I think it's true that I had a certain status in the college by that time. I had been there for 18 years, I had been department chair, and...when there would be faculty meetings, general faculty meetings, I would get up and ask the president questions, and so forth. So I think I was perceived as a standup guy, and somebody that people trusted, and...I guess from the flyers, we said we wanted to have a more – yeah, we wanted to have a more active, democratic, participatory, stronger union. So we got a pretty good response. People started to come.

We held regular meetings, monthly meetings, more people came to the meetings, I invited speakers, and there was a lot more listening, a lot more interaction at the meetings. We worked on specific issues, you know, the toilets, the cleanliness of the toilets, a lot of local small stuff like that. I think

we defended probably people a little bit more strongly grievance wise, and we began to make individual issues public issues. The way they operated before was more or less – at least my perception of it was the chapter chair would go see the president, and they'd work out a deal. Some kind of compromise or something. And our approach was to have petitions, you know, we tried to do more collective kinds of things.

And then -

Bill: Did you have regular labor management meetings?

John: Yeah, that's right. We did, we had those meetings, we had them more regularly, and they were a little bit more challenging, and we challenged the president more.

Bill: I assume Shenker was no longer there.

John: Yeah, he was gone. Let's see...

Andrea: Were there other "New Directions" groups forming in other campuses? Or was that just your own name?

John: Well, we used that until 1995, which by that time other things had happened, right? Bill and Jim, I guess, and some other folks did –

Bill: Jim Pearlstein, you're talking about?

John: Jim Pearlstein put together a fusion slate, initially.

John: And then Steve London was organizing. I think he also started by participating in the union that existed there.

Bill: This is where?

John: At Brooklyn College. And then he broke and he put together a slate. I think it may have been a year or two after we did it at LaGuardia. So there began to be little things. We started to go around to other colleges and people that we knew.

Bill: Who's the we, people from LaGuardia or together with other people, from other colleges?

John: Mainly Frank and myself.

Bill: What colleges did you go to? Do you remember?

John: City College, I think. We met some people – I think we came to the Grad Center on ...42nd Street. And we met some people there. I remember Jim Cohen from John Jay, and...People who knew people – It was sort of a word of mouth thing. People seemed to be interested that this had happened at LaGuardia, and thought, well, yeah, maybe we could do it elsewhere, and so forth. I started to go to the chapter chairperson's meetings, again, I got another view of it all. And he [Mike Frank] and I began to go to the delegate meetings as the chair and a delegate. And it didn't change at all. It became clear to us very quickly that...you couldn't have socialism in one country, you couldn't chapter, you know. We said this really has to be much wider.

[01:01:31]

Bill: What was your relationship with Paula Shipp, who was then the president of the PSC? And Arnold Janet was the executive director. And the leadership.

John: Yeah, it was always civil. It was always civil. I think in some ways they tried to accommodate us, on things that they could, and they didn't probably didn't like it but I don't think they were particularly bothered because we were too small. We would complain about things, why don't we do this, why don't we do that, and...we can't do that, we can't do this and that, and...I think they didn't like it, but I don't think they were particularly threatened by it, initially.

And then, again, so then it was BMCC, it was Brooklyn College – I forget the order in which things began to move around. And the line that I took while trying to convince people in other places to do likewise was, “look, we're getting zero contracts, we're getting messed over administratively, and we have no power, we can't affect things. Wouldn't it be good if we had an organization? An organization that had telephones, a printing press, computers, space to meet in, and so forth.” And people were going, yeah, yeah, that would be good. “We do. It's the union. And it's just sitting there.” I said, “Why don't we take the damn thing over?” [laughter]

And that resonated with a certain number of people. And it sort of gradually built, little by little, until 1995 we called a meeting at the BMCC, I think, in the room with all the windows. I forget what the room is called. And it was a founding meeting, and we called it the New Caucus. And Steve London gave a speech, and I think he had written a program. The chapters where we won elections had begun to do newsletters. And eventually, at this meeting, we formed The New Caucus.

Andrea: How many people were there, and what was the sentiment?

John: I think it was about 100, 110 people. The atmosphere, as I remember, was sort of like a college reunion, you know? People had all these relationships

together over the years in all these other struggles and so forth, but had not been working together explicitly. I think what happened was the union was such that people were turned off by it, and because they were political people, they found other political things to do. So people continued to be political, but they were all over the place. So this brought a lot of those folks together. And some of the people were terrific organizers. I mean, Martin Isles was a terrific organizer, and Nancy Romer, a terrific organizer, and there were a number of people who were very good, and so it gradually spread. And as it spread, it would go someplace else. And it got easier as time went on, because people knew that something was happening. So then Cecilia, I think, won an election at –

Bill: Cecilia McCall?

John: Cecilia McCall won an election at Baruch, Barbara Bowen at Queens College. And so, in 1997 there was an election for the leadership of the whole union, and we put together a whole slate, and we ran. And I myself, I guess, in some ways, naively, thought we were going to win. I thought... To me it was so obvious. These people aren't doing anything, from my point of view. They're not doing anything. We got all these good people. We're going to win. Obviously, I did not take into account that the other people had all kinds of relationships and histories, plus inertia and fear of change, and, you know, who are these people? There was a little kind of – I don't know if you could call it red baiting, but at least pink baiting. There was a certain kind of, oh, these people, they're all movement people and I'm sure there was insurgencies, that these people are communists or something like that.

But we lost. I think we got about 35 percent of the vote. So, on the one hand, we were discouraged, at least I was, "what the hell is this?". But then, on the other hand, we knew that we had the momentum. Because we were winning chapter election – I mean, by that time, almost every chapter election, which we ran, we won. So, by 2000, we had this very good base. They only had a couple of campuses. And we had a convention. By that time we had a convention and we had a contested election within the New Caucus for the position of president. Steve London had run as president in '97, and he ran again for that position in the New Caucus in 2000, and Barbara Bowen ran for that position in 2000.

It was a very interesting New Caucus meeting. They debated, and they spoke – each candidate had to present themselves, and somebody presented them. And Bart Myers presented Steve, Marilyn Neimark presented Barbara – And there was a vote, and I don't remember the exact numbers, but it was, I would say, something like 80/60, something like that, in favor of Barbara. And the agreement was, in the New Caucus, whoever didn't get the president position would get the vice president position. And Cecilia became treasurer, and I became secretary.

Bill: And that was a big jump. Why did you agree to stand for one of the top four offices?

John: Well, in '97 I was the candidate for vice president. It was Steve, myself, I think Cecilia, and Jim Pearlstein. And then it was Barbara, Steve, Cecilia and myself.

Bill: And why treasurer? Your background is not accounting, it's sociology.

John: That's right. I think basically Cecilia didn't want to do that.

Andrea: Well, how did it change in those years? Was it your activism? Was it a campaign that you waged or...?

John: Well, I...How did I wind up being one of the four principal officers or...?

Andrea: Who the four were, how did that develop in the New Caucus?

John: Well, actually, what happened was that we had – we were very active in '97 preparing for the election, and we campaigned. You know, so people became visible in the campaigning. And we met an awful lot. Prior to the campaigns we would meet weekly. Every Saturday, often, at BMCC, or Murphy, or Center for Worker Education, when it was on Hudson Street. So there were a lot of meetings, and people got to know each other, and they got to size up people, and so forth. We hired – in '97 Ray Rogers from Corporate Campaign to help us with the campaign, mostly with literature. I think we wrote the literature or he wrote some and we edited it – I forget exactly the process. It was both, probably a mix of both. But he had a lot of experience. He was very helpful to us in organizing meetings and so forth.

And then, as it got close to 2000, and we were going to run again, this time we were more sure that we were going to win. We hired Ray again, and I think it was in the 2000 election we hired Selma Marks, who's a skilled and experienced union organizer. She had worked with a number of different unions. And she was very good and very helpful. She was very organized, very disciplined, she didn't take our guff or our stupidity, or whatever, you know [laughs]. No, you got a job to do, get out there and do it, and report back next week, and so forth. It was a real campaign, the way people do union organizing drives and elections and so forth.

Andrea: And how did the incumbents behave?

Bill: Who did you run against?

John: Okay, well, in '97 Irwin Polishook ran, and Steve ran against him. And we could see from the debates that Irwin had a certain stature. People respected him. Liked him, in some ways. Not unanimously, but you could tell that people trusted him. And they were a little bit leery, especially after all these years, a little bit leery. Who are these new people, you know? So, then by 2000, we had a slate, we were coming. And Irwin resigned, and they put Richard Boris in as president. I think the idea was that he would be able to run as the incumbent. So it was Barbara against Richard Boris. I think in the events at the colleges we were able to get the debates. I think we did very well.

The results were something like 56, 57, 58 to 40.

Andrea: Were they primarily defending their record and the contracts and things like that?

John: That's right. Experience. Experience. They were experienced, we weren't.

Bill: And what was New Caucus countering with?

John: Oh...Well, we had just come out of ten years with five zeroes, for one thing. And then, our activity, and record on the campuses. We felt we had a good track record. We had experienced leadership at the chapter level, you know. And we were obviously active, and had more ideas about what needed to be done, and so forth. We proposed that we wanted to be a democratic union with power. So we won that by – I remember this. I think (you'll remember this too), because the day of the counting of the ballots in 2000 we had agreed that mainly the people on the slate and the people who were very involved in the campaign went to counting of the ballots at AAA, American Arbitration Association. And we stayed there until they counted. I mean, we said, well, anyone who wants to come, we'll meet in this restaurant/café a block or two away. It was nice; it had an outdoor café part.

So, at a certain point, it became clear that we had won. And there was still some cleaning up of details, but some of us went over to the café. And we were sitting there celebrating, and as people drifted in, people – I remember, people would walk up and say, well, how did we do? And we said we won. We won. We won. We won. Oh, good, okay. To me it was so reflective of how people had gotten used to losing. Right? And, you know, being defeated, and beat up and dismissed and stuff like that. So we had to get used to the idea – we won, you know? So that was a lot of fun, in a way. Then we had a real good party. We had a great party at 1199. We got the whole of 1199, and we had food and drink, and music, and speeches, and everything else. It was a great night. And...

Andrea: Then you won.

John: Then we won. So then...

Andrea: Then you had to do something.

John: Then we had to do something, right, that's what we said, you know, oh boy, now it really starts, you know.

Bill: What was the transition like? I mean...Between old and new. I mean...Was the outgoing Boris administration helpful in terms of helping you guys to move in?

John: Right, there was one other thing I wanted to say before I –

Bill: Sure. Go ahead.

John: - so if you would hold that. About how people got positions, I think, to a certain degree. As I said, we were meeting on a Saturday basis, and we had – there was a New Caucus coordinating committee, right? So people who were in those positions became more visible and more obvious. For a period of time, Nancy Romer and I co-chaired the Saturday meetings, which was hard. You know our people, are very verbal, they believe in what they think, and I remember chairing those meetings being tired when the meeting was over. People were respectful and so forth, but it was hard work to control it – not control it, but in a sense move it. So I think people became known and perceived in certain ways. Plus, I was the only community college – we wanted a community college person on the slate, and I had been visible and so forth.

So, to go back to the transition...The first day we officially took over, we went in, we sat down with Boris, we had a very simple conversation. He said he would do whatever he could to help us. And then, basically he, was gone. The executive director, Frank Annunziato, was still there, and he stayed till the fall. This is May, we took office in May. And we had the existing staff, some of whom we were not pleased with from our previous experience when we were not in office. The telephone system was not in good shape. The computer system was not in good shape. Steve London did a lot of the initial work in getting a new telephone system, he got more computers, and...he was like that.

The first big thing that we had was contract negotiations. I think...I'm not sure if it expired or was going to expire. Probably expired – it seemed to be often negotiated.

Andrea: Can I ask you one thing about the early organizing of the New Caucus and coming together? You didn't mention professional staff yet, and I'm

wondering...And you said the New Caucus – your slate was diverse in many ways. How were professional staff, or not, involved? At what point did they become involved?

John: Right. I think it happened campus by campus. I mean at some campuses, I think the professional staff were more involved right from the get-go. I remember at Queens, for example, Iris DeLutro and Eileen Moran were very active and so forth. I'm trying to see...At LaGuardia...Well, I think – well, on the chapter, at the chapter level, the officers are faculty, because the professional staff is organized in a cross-campus way. So, professional staff HEOs would not be running on the local chapter slate, executive committee.

They could run for Welfare Fund Advisory Committee, and I think that was where they became active, or more active, officially, on the chapter level. So I think it happened campus by campus, and then when we formed in '95, and especially when we ran in '97 there were positions on the executive committee for professional staff, HEOs and CLTs, so they became more prominent and visible.

And then after that, when we were functioning as the New Caucus, when we had New Caucus events and meetings, Frankly, I don't remember big distinctions between faculty and staff. If someone was...a HEO was active and doing stuff, I don't remember that as a problem.

Bill: But isn't it true that in 2000 the New Caucus won all the executive council positions, except the cross-campus positions, which were the professional staff?

Andrea: Steve Trimboli?

Bill: Steve Trimboli and I think Shelley [unintelligible 01:21:26].

John: And Peter Holberman. That's interesting. I'm trying to remember.

Bill: They did win.

John: They did? Okay. Okay, that's interesting. I'd forgotten about that.

Bill: And there were still CUUC people on the delegate assembly. What was the interaction after the New Caucus victory with the CUUC people over the short term and long terms?

John: Right. That's right. So there were still maybe a quarter or a third of the delegate assembly people from the other caucus and slate. And I think the first meeting that we held when we took office was at the Grad Center was in the auditorium at the old Grad Center. And there was a disputed election among

the community college offices. Nora Chase, who had run on the CUUC Caucus, and a guy (I forget his name now – from Bronx Community College, who ran on our slate). It was very close, and it was debated.

I think there was a question of the seating, of whether Nora or this other guy would be seated. I think that was the issue. In any case, the CUUC people walked out. They walked out of the meeting, and they stood outside the auditorium. And we didn't have a quorum. So we went out, and we argued back and forth. It was not a friendly discussion exactly. I think they were feeling badly about having been beaten. This was like a last stand kind of a thing, at least from my point of view. I forget how we resolved it, but we resolved it, they came back in, and then we went ahead.

I would say the people from the CUUC slate who won, we really didn't have a problem with them. Because I think they had a trade union mentality. And that was true of a lot of the people. We didn't exclude people who had been active before. If they wanted to continue to be active, and active in the way that we were going, fine. So there were grievance counselors who continued to be grievance counselors, people on – if they wanted to be on committees and so forth. You know, that was fine. We didn't exclude people on the basis of them having been part of the other slate.

Bill: What happened to the CUUC Caucus?

John: I think it pretty much dissolved. They had no (I don't think) a structure of their own. They were completely involved in the union, and the only time they met as a caucus was around election time when they put together the slate and ran a campaign. Most of the time they didn't have to run a campaign, because there was no opposition. There had been no opposition, probably, since '74 or something like that. I think that was a contested election, and after that it was all no contest until '97. So they weren't even used to that, you know. And I guess they felt there was no need for them to have any structure.

So, they basically dissolved. Some continued to work with us, the majority went back to their colleges. When we had chapter meetings and we'd go out to the campuses and meet there'd be a little bit of sniping. But, for the most part, gone. So the first time we ran again, which was '03, there was no opposition. I think in '06, that's when this other...I don't know what to call it, even...group ran another slate. They were defeated, I think they ran again in '09, and they were defeated, and I think in '12 there was nothing. There was no opposition.

Bill: 2003, did any of the CUUC people run on the New Caucus slate?

Andrea: Well, Steve Trimboli stayed on.

John: That's right. Well, after CUUC dissolved, they were just members. I don't know – I think some of them may have actually signed up and became New Caucus members. I think they came to New Caucus meetings and so on. In fact, I think they had to be, because I think you had to be a New Caucus member to be on the slate.

Andrea: Let's go back to when you first took office and you started to say you had new offices and new equipment. What did you feel like the principal challenges were you had to deal with right away?

John: Well, concretely, it was the contract negotiations. And secondly we wanted this participatory, active union, right? How do you do that? The office was a beehive of activity. There were a lot of committees. A lot of people were involved. There was this sort of flood of energy. It was like energy among some faculty and staff had been dammed up by what I perceived as the inactivity of the union, now there was an opening. Whoa. Some people came in, ideas, energy, desires, and so forth.

And there was a lot of participation, like hiring. I remember we had – I don't know if it was called a personnel committee, but we had a pretty big group involved in the hires we had to make. Because some people left voluntarily when we came in, and some people we let go. We did an assessment of what their performance was, and if we found it unsatisfactory for what we wanted to do. They had pensions and so forth, so we arranged, basically, exit packages of healthcare for x amount of time, and they got their accrued pension money, and so forth.

So, we gradually reconstituted the staff. The executive director, which was a key position, stayed around during the summer when we began contract negotiations, but Barbara immediately took control of the contract negotiations; became the main negotiator. Whereas I think in the past the executive director – I wasn't in on that, but the way I heard it described it sounded as if Arnold Kantor the executive director, mainly did the negotiation. Irwin Polishook and others were there and participated, but it seemed to be mainly driven by the executive director. And then Annunziato replaced or succeeded Arnold Kantor, and he did at least one negotiation, if not more.

So anyhow, Barbara asked for materials in the last negotiation, and he brought in a cardboard box with a lot of yellow pages of hand-written notes. In our case, Cecilia sat there with a computer and typed up minutes of each negotiating session on the spot. So we have a library, if you will, of the negotiations.

[01:30:25]

Bill: Digitized.

John: So that was different. And I guess my sense was that the previous executive director didn't have much of a future with us. And so he stayed till the fall and then he left. And then the other person, who was an office manager – We let her go. [There was] sort of like this executive secretary. I think she left on her own. And I think we let go the editor of the newspaper. But a lot of people stayed. Debra Bergen stayed as head of grievances and contract administration. The membership coordinator stayed. Financial coordinator stayed. A lot of people stayed.

Bill: Let's go back just a little, right after the election. You win. When you, and Barbara, and Steve, and Cecilia, as the four top officers, initially meet, what are the dynamics of that? Did you create a division of labor? Did you immediately prioritize what you had to do over the coming months? I mean, all of a sudden, you're out of power, and now you're in.

John: That's right.

Bill: And you have a big challenge in front of you.

John: Yeah. Well, we began to sort things out, and see who was going to do what. Right? Barbara's role is universal, in a sense, and Steve's also. I mean, as described in the constitution and so forth. The secretary has a more narrowly defined function, the treasurer a little bit more narrowly defined function, but the ideology of the New Caucus was that this was going to be a collective leadership. I think that was the term that was used a lot during the campaign and so forth. So I think there was a a good amount of equality. It was sort of a foursome.

Bill: And what did that collective leadership look like? A collective among the top four officers? A collective among the executive council? The DA? I mean, there are levels of leadership...

John: That's true. That's right.

Bill: In the PSC. And obviously, the four top officers have more control over the day-to-day operations.

John: Right, well, we were fulltime, basically. We all had full release time. I taught one course a semester, but I was basically there fulltime. And we met every Wednesday morning, and Barbara would have an agenda, we could add to it, and we just worked on the things that were on the agenda, all the various things that had to be done. A lot of stuff was shared and played out with the executive committee, [which] was quite active, and had, I think, a good bit of input. The delegate assembly meetings had a certain energy from that opening

of the gates. There was a fair amount of debate back and forth, not always unanimity. We tried different things –

Bill: Would you say this at all levels: The four officers, the EC and the DA?

John: Not much at all between the four of us, some, but not a whole lot at the EC, more at the delegate assembly. It was larger and it was more diversified, in a way. But there were a lot of committees. There were all the committees that we started to form, because we saw committees as a way to get more people involved. We were very interested in participation. It was our belief system, if you will, that a strong union is a democratic, broad-based, rank and file union. In fact, we bought copies of a book, “Democracy is Power” – it’s a [Labor Notes] book and we gave it to all the members of the EC. I think we discussed it a little bit.

We had some retreats. I know there was a retreat on political action in the PSC. I think there might’ve been 80 to 100 people. We went to a motel in Tarrytown, we had speakers, and so forth. At the delegate assembly meetings sometimes we broke up into groups, and the groups discussed and then reported back. That was certainly true with the contract negotiations. I mean, people broke up into groups and discussed what the demands should be and would be. And so there was a fair amount of that.

Bill: You talked about your dissertation earlier, and you talked about Max Weber. Insights about how institutions that are initially innovative and charismatic become routinized. I mean, this is something that obviously the four officers, maybe you in particular, were very conscious of. So was this basically the way you tried to keep things innovative? You come in with a certain ideology, you know, the relationship between *bottom up and top down*, but of course no matter what your ideology is, there’s a lot of power concentrated at the top. So, [was] that a challenge and a contradiction for you to deal with?

John: I think that that dynamic has played out, to a certain degree. In other words, I think there was more charisma at the beginning, and more routinization as time goes on. I think either external conditions can force a break in the routinization, or people internally can challenge that process. I think that among the people who were there the most, the four principal officers, with reassigned time, people on the Executive Committee, people who had specific tasks, maybe, with other committees, there has been a lot of closeness, and respect, and in many ways, friendship. I think people recognize the intelligence and the hard work of the leadership. People don’t agree with every single thing that they do, and they don’t agree with every way that things are done.

I don’t think – I haven’t experienced a big challenge to the leadership, because people observed that these smart people work hard. And plus, we’ve been

doing this for – We're in office for 14 years now, and then we had ten years, not all of us ten years, but for me ten years before that, other people, seven, eight, etcetera, [years, they] came into the activity. You became friends. I think it's in general – you have a harder time challenging, criticizing, your friends.

I was thinking about this. I was thinking, you know, it's interesting. I think Jefferson said something like every 25 years there should be some kind of an upheaval. It might've been an interesting idea for him, but I don't think he did it himself. So, I mean, it's hard to do that.

I observed early on, with the welfare rights movement: I had a storefront in Bed-Stuy and we went out in the neighborhood, and we leafleted, and people on welfare came to the storefront for meetings, and we explained what the program was; to collectively try to change the welfare system. And we elected a beginning group. We elected leadership. At that time I was the organizer. I didn't know anything else but president, vice president, secretary and treasurer. That was the only model of an organization that I knew, which is vertical.

So we had an election, and a woman became the president. Good person. Worked at it and so forth. However, she liked being the president. I mean, this was pretty nifty, right? She had the key to the storefront. When she went into the meeting, she was up front at the desk, right? She ran the meeting. And I think she liked being in that position so much, she didn't make it easy for other people to participate. And people would come, and they'd come for a week or two, and then they wouldn't come back. And I was [the organizer] and I'm scratching my head. What's going on here? I couldn't figure it out. What's going on? What is this? And then it dawned on me. In a sense, that she would rather see the organization stay relatively small, as long as she was the president. So I said, wow, what am I going to do about this? I'm the organizer, I'm not the boss. I'm not going to walk in and say you're out.

But what I did do is to set up a horizontal structure, which was based on tasks. We need to raise money, we needed to have childcare so people could come there and we could go down to the center together. We had about four or five things we needed done. People began to get together and do them like that, and that was across the board. Nobody was above anybody else. And it functioned like that for a while. It sort of functioned both ways. The vertical thing continued, and the horizontal thing was beginning. What happened was, (which is what I hoped to happen), was that out of those horizontal groups some of the people came to be recognized and were visible. The next time we had an election, one of those people became the leader. And this person was more welcoming, more inclusive and so forth. I think that periodically it's good for an organization to take a look at its structure and so forth.

My sense is that a big thing with us, I think, has always been the activity level is so high. The demands are so prominent, that we get into a busy mode. And the business becomes the explanation for not doing some other things.

Andrea: Was that the case in the six years you were in office – are you describing what it was like?

John: Yeah, yeah, sure, I wouldn't exclude myself – with that period of time – from that. I think that I did not make enough time, or propose that we make enough time, to reflect on what we were doing. I think that we were so intent and intense on doing the various things that we didn't step back and say, well, wait a second, let's see what's going on. To what degree are we doing this the way we have said we wanted to do it? Yeah, I would say I wish we had done more stepping back and reflecting.

Bill: The center of activity for New Caucus members is the New Caucus. Once you're elected, didn't that center of activity kind of shift to the PSC? Any reflections on the changing relationship between the PSC and the New Caucus?

John: Yeah, the New Caucus gradually became basically an electoral caucus. That hasn't functioned a whole lot, it seems to me. Yeah, we have meetings, we have topics, we have speakers, so that's all good, but it's not sustained, in a way, it seems to me. It sort of pops up and dies down, pops up, dies down, and then there's sort of a flurry around election time. I think it's very hard. I mean, I can't point to a lot of other organizations, no less labor unions, that have mastered this. In fact, I would say it's much more of a problem in most of the other labor unions. I mean, some of the stuff that [I've observed with] other unions...whoa, they need a New Caucus, you know, and shake it up.

Andrea: And so the things that you aimed to do at the beginning, the contract, building participation, expanding the office, right? So, how do you feel those goals went along in those first years?

John: Pretty good. Yeah, I think we did basically a good job with that. I think we did a decent job. I don't think the [part-timers] feel that way, but I think we did a decent job responding to them within the constraints of – you know, we're an entity on a big field. I mean, one of the things we had to figure out was how we relate to NYSUT? How do we relate to the AAUP? How do we relate to AFT? How do we relate to the Central Labor Council for the state fed? And obviously I think the big one was NYSUT and AFT, right? Because there were caucuses there, right? And I think the big discussion, debate, at the first AFT meeting – where we had to decide whether to join the Unity Caucus. I think they called it “Progressive” [caucus] –

Bill: So timeline – this is July 2000?

John: Yes. That's –

Bill: You were elected in April and you take office in May.

John: May, exactly. So we go to, I think...Where was that? Philadelphia or something? In any case, we go there, and the deal is join the caucus, and Barbara becomes the vice president. And I remember we were in a conference room, and it was back and forth. Some people said no, we should not join that caucus, it's "Shankerite", it's overly centralized, *top down*. And others said no, it's important that Barbara be in a position where she can influence things and so forth, you know. It's important that we have a more positive relationship with them because they have resources that we want. And there were going to be campaigns or issues where we want them on our side. So we went back and forth, and we voted, and we voted to join the caucus. We made a deal with them that only 51, 50 plus 1 percent of our people had to join.

And so we've always had sort of a somewhat contentious relationship with AFT and NYSUT. I think it's gotten...My impression is it's gotten better over time, but it's still a problem. We have a very different set of ideas and, ways of doing things than they do.

Bill: Let's go back to the first contract, and you started to tell us what was different in terms of how this contract was negotiated. Not primarily by the executive director but by the officers and Barbara in the lead. Tell us more about how you got that first contract. Was there a contract campaign? What was really different about your approach? And what did you get out of that contract?

John: What I remember is a lot of input around the contract demands. A lot of proposals, and voting, and separating, and sorting out, and so forth, both at the EC and at the delegate assembly. I remember those meetings in which we broke down into groups, say, at the delegate assembly, and people talked about the demands, and also the idea of a campaign. And a campaign, I guess, at the campus level; I know there were some demonstrations; I know there were demonstrations out in the street when we were in negotiations. Negotiations were held alternately at 80th Street and at the PSC. So sometimes at PSC there'd be members demonstrating around the contract outside in the street. Sometimes you could hear them even upstairs. The idea was that they knew that there were members doing that. We wanted them to know that it was not just the 15 people or so in the room, but that those 15 people represented a lot of people outside.

CUNY brought in, beside their staff people, Randy Levine, who was a lawyer and had been deputy mayor under Giuliani. They hired him as a consultant. So the first (he's now the president of the New York Yankees. A big, blonde, curly-headed guy) So, they come into the room at the PSC. [and say] "this is

basically how we do it. It's confidentiality— We said, fuck you [laughs] – I mean, we didn't do it verbally, but...fuck you. (Is this allowed on this thing?) Anyhow, it was something along those lines. Who does this guy think we are? He's going to walk in here and tell us what to do? Barbara is a very good spokesperson, [and she said] “no, no, you're not going to dictate the rules of the game. We'll take a look at it, we'll think about it, and we'll let you know what our position is.”

So he stayed around for maybe, three sessions. He wasn't going to do the nitty, gritty negotiations. He was there for a little bit and then he left.

Andrea: So presumably even the ground rules got negotiated.

John: Yeah, some of them we didn't accept, you know, we weren't going to accept this *absolute confidentiality* that they wanted. But there were tensions between what we wanted to do and what was possible. And in some cases it was clear that you couldn't just walk from the negotiating table to a mass meeting and tell everybody what had gone on, right? And what our next step was and so forth. There was a tension between...

Andrea: Well, I heard you had something like 152 demands, right?

John: Oh, yeah, that's right, that's right. That was the other thing. We had a huge number of demands. Yeah, so we had to learn how to do all those sorts of things. I remember Polishook said to me, after we won the election, “I guess you learned it's not so easy, is it?” And I had to say “yeah, you're right, it's not so easy.” It was not. We could not do what we wanted to do as quickly and as easy as I think we thought.

Andrea: Did you realize that right away, or was that a process?

John: No, it was gradual.

Andrea: And what did you do as you were realizing that? What changed?

John: I don't think we ever really – I'm not aware, (or at least remembering), ever explicitly saying that amongst ourselves. I think we just continued to do things, and adapt to the circumstances and so forth. I think the image of a field is a useful one for me for thinking about it: There are positions, right? And positions affect the play of the game, right? And there are people on the field, and there are people off the field, and you need to get into position to make certain plays, and if you're out of position – you know, so I tend to think about it along those lines of – getting in position, and having power in various positions and so forth. But it was certainly more complicated than we realized.

Bill: I know you talked about big issues that you had to identify, and you touched briefly upon adjuncts. I mean, what, generally, was the thinking of the officers and the EC, and, I guess, ultimately, the DA about how to deal with this growing population of adjuncts?

John: I think that...Conceptually, we knew that something had to be done. This was not acceptable, the way they were treated and the way they were used in the university. I don't think we...But, given this sort of field idea, there were other players involved. In other words, it seemed to me that some of the adjuncts wanted us simply, in the first contract, to not have any raises for anybody else, but dump all the money...Equalize. Bring up the bottom. That was the slogan? I guess we realized or came to the conclusion we couldn't do that. We have other members, right? And the university itself probably would not have done that, although we don't know because we never proposed that.

The thing was, how do we advance the pay and benefits and working conditions of the adjuncts, while taking into account the union as a whole, and the willingness of the university people to make certain changes. I mean, it was clear to us at negotiations at some point, they simply would not do certain things. Right? Some people, say, in the DA – no concessions. No concessionary bargaining. Well, that's a good slogan, but there are other people on the field. It's not as if you have 11 guys here and you just get the ball and you run down the field. Right? There's 11 other people there trying to push you back the other way. And they're not fools, and they have resources and so forth, so it is a pushing back and forth. I think that people who are not in the room, and on the field, have a hard time getting a hold of that.

I wish there could've been a session or series of sessions. I don't think it would be correct or the right way to do it, but sometimes I was tempted to say, well, look, here are the adjunct demands, we'll step outside, let the adjunct committee come in and you negotiate those. It was almost a reaction to the message 'you guys don't do enough'. I said, maybe. You might be able to do it better. There's no way to tell unless you actually get in there and do it. So it was sort of a piss-ass reaction on my part to that message of "you let us down again, you sold us out." And the only way to find out is if you go in and see what you can get. And see how you would move them to do those kinds of things. I think people learn it's not so easy. It's harder than we think when we're not in it.

[02:00:11]

So I have to remind myself of that now when I'm not in it. I have to remind myself when I look at other people. I think I have, from that I have a little bit of appreciation for all leaders, and leaders of other organizations. Once you put it in a larger framework of a larger field, and you see all the various forces that are at play. It's hard. That doesn't mean that we pull back in terms of

goals and where we want to go. I think we have to do that. But I think we need to understand it's not a walk in the park.

Bill: You raised before, that one of the decisions that you had to make was about staff, and you had identified that you had to hire a new Executive Director, and a new editor of Clarion. What were you looking for? How did you kind of see these positions?

John: Right. And we created a new position: Director of Organizing, which hadn't existed before.

They were all a function of this basic idea: a democratic, activist union, looking to develop power, and the idea that *democracy* is power. The more people that are involved, the stronger the union is. So we were looking for people who share that, right? So, with the Executive Director position, Debbie Bell had been at DC 37 for many years and had a good reputation throughout the city as competent, and basically progressive. I can't speak for her, but my sense was that she was ready for a change. And then the other top contender was a woman who had been, I think, with one of the acting unions. I forget which one. Actors' Equity, or something like that. And she was also a very attractive, competent person. There was an issue that she wasn't sure she wanted to do it. She wanted a six-month trial period. And we didn't want to do that. There was a lot of discussion and the Executive Committee had a lot to say about that. But eventually, Debbie seemed like a very good fit. And I remember people saying, Ed Ott saying, that it's really good that you got somebody of her caliber. She had such a reputation in the New York City labor movement of competence.

Bill: Ed Ott? Was he Executive Director at the Central Labor Council at that time?

John: No, at that time he wasn't. I forget what position he was in, in 2000, what role he had. And then the same thing with Peter Hogness, the editor of Clarion.

Bill: And what was your vision of Clarion? How was it different from what the Clarion had been in the past 30, 40 years?

John: Certainly a different look. You know, a broader outlook. In other words, we had a vision of what's sometimes called *social unionism*, a broader unionism, that's not just narrowly focused ... that pays attention, to the working class as a whole rather than just our own employee group. Versus business unions, which I think is largely what we had. So we wanted a newspaper that reflected that; that would deal not only with our own issues, but with also broader issues in labor and in society. That supported highlighting what the membership was doing. You know, this idea of the union is not the leadership, the union is the whole membership. That would cover and present what

members were doing both union wise and professionally. We wanted a more cultural dimension to it, about what people were reading or writing, and so forth. Yeah, that would promote the kind of union that that we wanted it to be.

Bill: Now, you said that creating an organizing department was a key initiative. What were you looking for in the director for that department?

John: Our idea was that, if you had a union, wouldn't it be good if you had people who were well informed? Wouldn't it be good if you had people who could speak publicly? Wouldn't it be good if you had people who do research? Wouldn't it be good if you had people who had all kinds of communication skills? Well, the answer is obviously yes, and again, the answer is our membership. Their job is to be informed, their job is to communicate, their job is to be able to function publicly, socially, and so forth. That's a huge strength, right? And so obviously the Director of Organizing was to elicit that, was to draw on all that energy, and all that power, and all the resources that were embodied in the knowledge and skills of the membership, and to draw that into the union.

Bill: Good. You were treasurer?

John: Yes.

Bill: Any particular achievements you think you made as treasurer? You know, more narrowly defined.

John: Yeah. Well, I think I tried to make it clear that a budget is a political document. It's not just a technical thing. It's not just a bookkeeping thing. It's a political document. And in some ways, it's a moral document. That is, it expresses the allocation of resources that the people make, that the union makes, and it should reflect the politics of the union. And we should think about it that way. And if you think about it that way, it may have some implications for the actual way that you allocate the resources. Secondly, it should be more transparent to the membership. It's not right for an organization, it's not good for an organization with a budget of – now I guess it's around 18 million a year – then it was maybe 10. It's not right to have all that money, members' money, only controlled by a very small group of people. And they get a monthly report, but it's sort of pro forma. Who knew what went into that, what the thinking was, and so forth?

So we formed the Finance Committee, which had a small group of members, but they were union members, prepare the budget. Faye Alladin [staff person] has a great deal to do with the preparation of the budget. But there were members who participated in that. And then we started to do...I think it continues. It sort of has fallen...It never really caught on, but...I guess it still gets done, I'm not sure. When we prepared the budget, besides presenting it to

the DA we had a time set aside before the DA in which the finance committee and I would be available to members. So the idea was to explain it to people, and then people who weren't in the DA, if they wanted to know about it, they could come. But I'd say for most people it's pro forma. I think there's a fair degree of trust, that's part of, I think, a trust in the leadership. For most people it's not inherently interesting.

I think that's what we did. We got a little bit more participation, I think, a little bit more transparency. We made it available to folks, but that availability I don't think has been taken advantage of, because I don't think people feel there's a need for it. Or there's not an interest in it.

Bill: Correct me if I'm wrong, but my understanding is that you played a key role in the move from 25 West 43rd Street down to 61 Broadway.

John: Yes.

Bill: Why the move? What were you looking for in terms of new space? What kind of functionality in the space [in order to reflect] the mission of the union?

John: Well, the move was generated by the fact that the lease was coming up; the lease was ending. So we saw that about three years ahead of time and so we began to think about it, and to prepare for that. We didn't want it to be a last minute thing and you wind up just renewing the lease for the hell of it, just to get it done. So we really began to try to think it through. Debbie played a big role in it, and we had a couple of other people. Eventually, we got a couple of recommendations for real estate brokers. We interviewed them, I think, mainly Debbie Bell and myself, and then we made a choice, and then we brought the people who we chose to the EC. And I think they came to the Delegate Assembly also.

We chose two people who were real estate brokers, commercial real estate brokers, but who had social work experience. So they were familiar with our kind of organization. That it wasn't just one – they were not just going to deal with the president of an organization, like a bank president or something like that, they were going to have to deal with an EC, and eventually a Delegate Assembly. So they understood that there were more people involved; you had to persuade or inform more people. Then they put together four or five places, and usually, the officers and Debbie, and ... I don't remember who else was involved would go and visit the spaces.

Bill: And what did you want in the space?

John: Well, we wanted more space. We had outgrown that space I mean, we're about double what we were in 2000. I think we were 9,800 in 2000 with about

600 adjuncts [members]. According to the financial statement of card signing members, we're about 18, 19,000. The number we represent is about 25,000. So, we about doubled in card signers, even. So we needed more space, we needed more staff. And I would say the tipping point or deciding point was the money, was the cost. Accessibility was one factor. Functionality was another. Was it a space that you could break up according to the number of people we had on staff? And we wanted a 'union hall', we wanted a big space – Rather than renting space at some other auditorium, we wanted to have a space of our own. And we wanted to keep the cost down. Where we are now, in some ways is not as accessible as we want. 43rd Street was probably as good as you could get. It was midtown, all the subways, Grand Central, Penn Station are not far away, and that was very good. But I think we would've had to redo...I'm not even sure we would've been on that floor, or if we were we would've had to knock it all down and fix it all up, and we would've had to get more space, and maybe another floor, and so forth. And plus, the cost in Midtown was going to be hard.

At that point, Lower Manhattan was still, affected by 9/11 and the rents were lower down there per square foot. It was an attempt to draw groups down there, and I think a fair number of unions and nonprofits either went there or certainly are there. UFT went down there. They were on [Park Place], Walker Avenue and 25rd Street. State Fed is down there. There are a lot of unions in and around there. So that seemed it okay. As it turned out, I'm not sure whether people are unhappy with the accessibility of it, especially at night, after the later meetings. I've heard that a little bit, but overall I think it worked out well financially, and...We've been able to expand a little bit even there, I'd say.

- Andrea: So, back to your tenure. At some point you decided that it was time to step down. Do you want to tell us a little bit about that?
- John: Well, I was 68, right? I would say I was tired. It was a very intense six years. It was very good; I enjoyed it very much. I liked what we did. But I was tired. And I tend to think it's good for people to leave positions so there's room for other people to come into those positions. So, I think it's good to be in a position for a while, because it takes you time to learn it and so forth, and I think it's good to get out and let other people...
- Bill: Did you and Cecilia McCall, who also stepped down in 2006, discuss this? Or were your decisions made independently?
- John: They were independent. I told people I was retiring, and Cecilia told people she was retiring.
- Bill: And you also retired from the university.

John: That's right.

Bill: In those six years, I mean, does anything stand out? You know, that you're most proud?

John: I think two things. I think the contracts were about as good as could've been gotten, in the conditions that we were in. The money was fairly good. I think the sabbaticals were very good. I think the family-care aspects. I think a big thing that's still a very hard nut to crack is the workload piece, primarily, because it costs so much. I think beyond the specifics of the contracts, I think that we held together pretty well, and we stayed pretty faithful to what we intended to do, or what we wanted to do and what people wanted us to do. I know there's disagreement about that, but I'm comfortable with it.

Bill: And how was the transition for you? – Union office to retirement. I mean, obviously you've still kept active. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

John: Yeah. Well, at first my idea when I retired was I didn't want to do anything for six months. Because I just wanted to take a deep breath, figure things out, and just relax. I intended to continue to be active, but I just wanted some space. See what it felt like. And I found it good. I liked it very much. I like the freedom of it. We're fortunate that my economic situation is decent. And Patty, my wife, retired at the same time, and that's worked out well. She has a bunch of stuff that she likes to do, I have a bunch of stuff that I like to do. There's a bunch of stuff that we like to do together. So that's worked out well. I like very much the continuation with the union because I believe in it.

I think the way that I want to live means that people have to be organized. I learned that a long time ago, and I still hold to that. If you're not organized, you're *blankety-blank*. I think people need to have control over their own work. Activity is fundamental. If you can't control your own work, you're *blankety-blank*. And that has ramifications for everything else: healthcare, housing, education for kids and everything else. So I think it's essential, but not sufficient. So I think there's a need for a strong labor movement, and it needs to be situated in a larger progressive political movement. And I think labor can contribute to that. Needs to contribute to that, otherwise it'll die or it'll get beat up, as it often these days. So I'm glad to be part of that.

Bill: In what ways are you still part of it? Tell us just briefly what kind of activity you're still doing in social movements, in the union.

John: Well, I'm active in the retiree chapter, which is a very good chapter. A big thing for me is that the union is not only a place where I did work and political work and so forth, it's a place where I have friends. Good friends. People I like to be with. So the retiree chapter enables me to do that. So right now we're doing things on social safety net, which obviously affects us very much.

My life would be very different without social security and Medicare. That's true, I think, of all of us. And I continue to do solidarity work, go to the Central Labor Council, with Jim Pearlstein and a lot of meetings. Right now it's led to activity around the People's Climate march coming up in September.

Bill: You're also in leadership of a citywide organization of municipal retirees. Why don't you tell us a little bit about that?

John: Okay. So there's an organization that a former PSC retiree chapter chair, Larry Kaplan, was instrumental in reviving. It's called the Council of Municipal Retiree Organizations, COMRO, and it brings together once a month about 25 retirees from city unions, UFT, DC 37, some of the uniforms, CWA 1180. It's a place where we share information about retiree issues. We do a little bit of advocacy: write letters. We're trying to move in the direction of becoming more advocates for retiree issues. Yeah. It's good too. It's good for those folks to be in touch with each other.

Yeah, let me just go back to the friendship part. It's an important part of a union? I don't like to separate the functional aspects or the instrumental aspects from the associational, to social aspects – the human aspects. I don't think a union can be strong unless people care about each other. Martin Luther King Jr. talked about the Civil Rights Movement in terms of the formation of what he called a joyful community. That's important for the labor movement as well.

Andrea: Maybe on that note, before we finish, is there anything, any other points or any questions you think you would want to answer that we didn't ask?

John: I don't think I'd say anything different. It's simply a reinforcement, if you will, of the importance of people having an experience of power. I think that it's not good for people to feel powerless. And we don't have power, ordinary people; working people, don't have power, unless they're organized. So, I think a lot about that. How do you do organization in such a way that people develop themselves? I think the labor union movement is a *human development* movement. If people don't develop, if they're just recipients of contracts and stuff like that, they don't have a sense that they made a difference. It's a big loss, and ultimately it doesn't work. It's not effective. I mean, one of the things that struck me about the welfare rights movement was seeing people develop; people who were, in society, often looked down upon, dismissed. And to see those people develop, find out who they were and what they had, has always seemed to me to be a big part of what we do. I think that's it.

Bill: So, maybe just on that note, of identity, community, human development and empowerment, we should conclude.

Andrea: This was great.

Bill: Thank you, John.

John: Thank you.

Andrea: Thank you so much.

John: It was interesting doing this.

[End of recorded material 02:28:41]