

Interview: Gayle Nye (GN)
Interviewer: Rod Mickleburgh (RM)
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Transcription: Cathy Walker

RM [00:00:06] We're very lucky to have Gayle Nye with us and, very unusually, we'll start right at the beginning. Give me your family background and tell me about your early days and your parents.

GN [00:00:21] All right, I will do. Cast back a long way. Early beginnings, my ancestors are from Guangdong, China. The first of whom was Nai Xi, who came in the, about 1870s. He carried with him, I found out, a statue of a deity named Tam Kung [Tam Gong], and left that in a creche when he went to the gold searches. When he came back, he and others established the Tam Kung Temple in Victoria. I've been active in that renovation of late, but we're four generations from Tam Kung. My parents, their parents and myself and kids, all have grown up in Victoria, and went to school in Fairfield Gonzalez, on through. I, just getting into the workforce, came into the BCGEU in its early times.

RM [00:01:34] I'm going to stop you there. You're from a real pioneer family.

GN [00:01:39] Yes.

RM [00:01:41] What did your parents, I don't know whether your mum worked, but what did your dad do?

GN [00:01:45] My dad and his dad and his brothers were fishers. Then my dad, after he and my mum were married, went into the B.C. public service. He worked in the Ministry of Education. Going back to my grandfather, who was a fisher, and my dad's two brothers, they were actually going out on the spring season. My mum and dad had just gotten married. The sad thing is, we didn't get to know them. They were caught in a storm, and their ship was downed, and their bodies were never found. It was sad.

RM [00:02:29] Sorry, whose bodies were never found?

GN [00:02:31] My dad's older brothers.

RM [00:02:32] Oh my goodness.

GN [00:02:33] Yeah, my dad used to talk about that and how it impacted the family.

RM [00:02:39] They were coming from China or were they fishers?

GN [00:02:40] They were fishers here.

RM [00:02:41] Oh, so there was a tragedy.

GN [00:02:43] Yeah. My dad being the youngest and also because he just had married my mum, didn't go. It was in May of, I guess, 1952. He didn't go. For that reason, we're all here, myself and my siblings. My dad would talk about it every so often, sitting at the police

station waiting for news with his mum. There's a sad history. I think it broke her heart. She was much impacted, some of which has been researched with the recent project in Vancouver. The Chinese Historical Society and others have chronicled the 100th anniversary of the head tax. Some of those things came up, and so we're finding out, we're learning about that, through that.

RM [00:03:53] Were there two brothers that went down?

GN [00:03:54] Yes, two brothers, George and Roy Nye. My dad remained. We as a family grew up here in Victoria. Everyone. Well, I went away for work. Maybe that's for a little further on.

RM [00:04:11] Yes it is. You're lifelong Victoria, so tell me about your work history.

GN [00:04:18] My work history. Well, let me see. I used to with friends go and pick strawberries, tomatoes in the greenhouses of their parents. Some of the early Chinese had greenhouses and had gardens and aquaculture. That was the teen years. My first paid job was in the Royal Bank. It was not my field, but I also saw some inequity in that workplace. I thought places like this need to have voices for people. Then somehow my dad talking about his work in the Ministry of Education and the union coming about, the NDP government coming. There were some new collective agreements that were coming about and I thought this sounds interesting to me. I applied for and I got a job at the BC Medical Plan.

RM [00:05:23] When was that, Gayle?

GN [00:05:24] It would have been 1986, '85 or '86.

RM [00:05:36] That's good. The BCGEU was well-established by then.

GN [00:05:42] It had gone from an association to those early days. I became active in those early years. It was the time of Norm Richards.

RM [00:05:52] Norm Richards.

GN [00:05:54] Yeah.

RM [00:05:54] The postal clerk who became president.

GN [00:05:57] Who became president and wonderful to be part of that. I was in the admin services component, doing clerical work and admin in the Ministry of Health building, which had a huge workforce, hundreds — second, third, fourth floor and so on. Various of us went through training. The best moment was when a key steward and an HR person came through saying, we want to have a good relationship here, and we'd like each floor to step up or to elect a steward. That was a clarion call. I thought that would be exciting, went through a whole process. Two or three of us put our names forward or were nominated. I can't remember, but that was nerve-wracking.

RM [00:06:49] You did it.

GN [00:06:50] I did.

RM [00:06:51] What would attract? It's so easy not to do it. What prompted you?

GN [00:06:56] Felt there was a need, a sense of, I don't think I thought of it in terms of justice at the time, but to have a say and to take part. I was inspired by the steward and the HR person coming through together. I thought we could have a partnership here, and there were some things that seemed unfair. I think that was what called to me. I was nervous about it but from that point on to steward's training and, very quickly, welcomed by the BCGEU, by Norm and John Fryer and others. That was terrific. It taught me the importance of there being a hand extended and support and encouragement. I got lots of that. I served on the union's executive with John Shields and various others.

RM [00:07:59] Was Andstein around then?

GN [00:08:00] Yeah. He was the director of bargaining and we went to the bargaining table. There's wonderful memory and history. It was a tough thing. In the first collective agreement that I was involved in, we got sexual harassment protection language, and we had to describe to those at GERB, I think it was called then. We had to describe what is sexual harassment? What is that?

RM [00:08:34] Government Employees Relations Bureau.

GN [00:08:34] That's right. We put our heads together. There were two, three women at the table at the time, and the rest were John and Cliff and various others. We each sat according to the component we were representing. I used to be between two burly others, the engineering and tech component on this side and then the area councils of the BCGEU. I tried to put my elbows up so I had as much room as could be. A little daunting, and we didn't always, we would be invited to speak, but we couldn't jump up or anything. I understood what the process was. When it came time to talk about some of the impacts of sexual harassment and then broadened in years beyond that to human rights issues in harassment.

RM [00:09:33] Did you see or experience sexual harassment or you just gathered stories? How did you?

GN [00:09:38] I was a steward on behalf of women.

RM [00:09:43] Women would come to you.

GN [00:09:43] Yeah. There were perspectives and things that you see are inequitable. Somehow one could always move aside to deal with and counter things that came up. Yes, many, many times there were complaints and grievances and that was tough. It was also tough, in terms of support for someone that could stand and would stand up and name those issues.

RM [00:10:20] Now it's almost taken for granted but in those days, it was still kind of a new thing.

GN [00:10:27] It was very radical. It was thought to be, 'How could you say that?' There were those kinds of questions. There were those challenges, 'Well, who, was there a witness, and are you sure?' Those kinds of questions that rebuff. We had to counter that.

RM [00:10:48] It's not just, you resent this person, and you're trying to ruin their career.

GN [00:10:52] There was very much of that. I found that the employer side was often building things into the policy that would, it'd be a clause in order, if there was a facetious complaint or a mischievous complaint, the hit back would be as severe as anything else. They were trying to build in a deterrent from the get go. That was something that we talked about too, not only that there'd be a policy, but something that would actively encourage prevention, or that there'd be some remediation in that process.

RM [00:11:36] So women would feel encouraged to come forward.

GN [00:11:37] Yeah, but there were many who waited a long, long time to get an answer.

RM [00:11:44] You managed to actually negotiate a clause in your collective agreement on sexual harassment?

GN [00:11:49] In the (what used to be called the) master agreement, the overreaching agreement. Yes. Cliff and John Fryer and then later, John Shields, Diane Wood being treasurer, we were all there together. We did and then later as I went on to staff, we'd get assignments for different bargaining units and then we would negotiate those, taking from that language into agreements in various workplaces.

RM [00:12:25] That was kind of pioneering work back then. There wasn't really a blueprint for that, was there?

GN [00:12:33] Within the BCGEU the very first language was at Douglas College. Those in the component at Douglas College I think achieved the first language perhaps six or seven months before. Then we as part of our bargaining prep and process, we would look at that language and try and help from one to the other within the BCGEU because there were so many bargaining units, we were able to share. Yeah, there were a lot.

RM [00:13:04] That's great. Let's also talk about when did you get on staff?

GN [00:13:13] '87.

RM [00:13:14] '87. Were you conscious of, there couldn't have been very many Chinese Canadians involved in the BCGEU in those days.

GN [00:13:23] No, not many. I'd look around for. No, not at all. In fact, I think I was the first to be an elected officer on the executive. At the time it was not thinking about that going on. What was terrific was the opening, the sort of 'join us and come on in here.' I got to extend some of that doing human rights and equity as I moved into different positions within the union. I've got to cast back and it's to reference the importance of that sense. I went to my very first labour council meeting here in Victoria, and one of the other union's representatives was talking about the agenda. I think they were laying that out and we were just kind of all starry-eyed, thinking, I get to go the labour council. Someone just came alongside and said, 'You know, Chinese people didn't used to be welcome here.' It was a statement of fact and I accept that that happened, but I have to say it was a bit disarming. I thought, what does that mean here and now? That was one of those moments when I thought, I don't think I'll say that to anyone new, down the road. In the agenda setting or agenda being laid out, because that was always available at the door when you came in, you wondered where you'd find a spot to get in there.

RM [00:15:14] Raise your issues.

GN [00:15:15] Raise an issue. Exactly. I went and listened and learned. I don't think I was there more than a year or two and then I went onto staff. There were other people assigned and then also elected officers that would go. It was one of those things in terms of structuring or just having a different kind of agenda and an openness for participation. We didn't make such rigid agendas so that you wouldn't know where you could jump in.

RM [00:15:50] Did you experience any racism?

GN [00:15:55] I think just once. I overheard a comment when I first came on to staff that that must have been a quota being filled. There was a bit of that kind of conversation. I turned and 'What was that?' I don't know if it was retracted, but it just moved on. Then we just carried on. In terms of direct or in my face, no. I found it more comfortable, though, to speak up for somebody else or alongside somebody else, but face to face I think it'd be quite tough. When I was a kid growing up there were things that came up. It was always my Mum coming to school alongside and pointing out an issue. I don't know if we were so shielded that we barely knew or recognized it, but I do remember once or twice some name-calling. I went to Margaret Jenkins School way over in Gonzalez, and she came with us once. I think maybe that protective nature rubbed off on me. I've got young siblings and so we look out for one another.

RM [00:17:14] You get your fortitude from somewhere.

GN [00:17:18] I think so. My mum and my dad. My dad in a very quiet way. He was very steady there. He's gone now.

RM [00:17:31] What was your first, what was your staff job?

GN [00:17:34] I was a staff rep, a general staff rep here in Victoria. I got hired for Victoria, had to go to the Lower Mainland area office in Vancouver, where the GEU headquarters are on Canada Way for about ten months or so, eight or ten months to get some training from various others in a really busy, busy office. Then as soon as a space came up, I came back to Victoria.

RM [00:18:04] Did you like being a staff rep?

GN [00:18:05] Yeah, I did.

RM [00:18:06] What did you like about it?

GN [00:18:08] I liked meeting people, hearing about their work, worksites. It was all really exciting to me. A chance to step up and support and go alongside others. Yeah, very good in all of those ways. I liked the dynamics of that kind of balance with meeting the membership, but also doing some organizing, did some organizing. In some home support areas, we'd get assigned and go to various places. Loved being part of rallies, making signs, getting out there. We had a few, we had various rallies here. I can't think of the names of them all, but those were exciting, too. Nice when we got in with coalitions and other community groups. That's powerful, really powerful.

RM [00:19:12] What drove you, Gayle? You're sounding like a real active person.

GN [00:19:18] I think I like to be with people. I like for people to stand up and be heard, to stand up and be counted. I was inspired by many others. I had the Norms, the Johns, Cliffs, John Shields. I came on to staff during John Shields' time as president.

RM [00:19:44] He had quite the background, didn't he, in the south of the United States?

GN [00:19:48] We marched in Ottawa. One cold time, it was an On to Ottawa Trek. I remember being in the bitter cold and he had some suede shoes with a thin rubber sole and it was so cold. We put plastic bags and none of us from B.C. were used to that kind of cold, but I remember us being out there marching around and we would join up with the other national NUPGE National Union of Public—

RM [00:20:22] What was the issue for that, Gayle?

GN [00:20:24] Pensions, I believe. I think it was.

RM [00:20:28] You guys went all the way to Ottawa to march for pensions?

GN [00:20:32] Yep.

RM [00:20:32] For civil servants. Is that it?

GN [00:20:34] I think that was general. I think there was a threat of...

RM [00:20:38] Don't touch the pension plan.

GN [00:20:39] Yeah.

RM [00:20:40] Was that Mulroney? Do you remember what year that was? Actually, it doesn't matter.

GN [00:20:48] Early '80s. Yeah, because it was before I went on staff. I count everything from when I had our son. Would have been the early '80s, like '81 or so.

RM [00:21:01] I wonder if I was there covering that too.

GN [00:21:04] You covered a lot.

RM [00:21:05] Yeah. I was a labour reporter. I remember, they chartered a plane for everyone to go. I remember Jack Munro was on this plane, so it was just overnight, then you arrive in the morning, and then everyone went back after the march. It was really, really cold.

GN [00:21:26] Yes, it was.

RM [00:21:29] But you took to all that.

GN [00:21:30] I took to all that, really loved working with the membership. Then eventually evolved and I wanted to be the union's education officer. John knew that. I was on a leave. My husband and I, we've got a biological son, and then we adopted a daughter from China so I was on a leave after her adoption, and the education officer's position came up. I remember hearing from John saying, 'This is coming up. When are you coming back?' As

time went on, it seemed I got to take on that role, that responsibility. We did some good work in those years, I believe.

RM [00:22:24] What did you do?

GN [00:22:27] Instead of approaching things from just, here's a course, these are your human rights and laying it out, we developed equity in human rights education that really took a model of Paolo Friere and the pedagogy of the oppressed. It's very engaging in terms and centred on the participant and their experience. We did a lot of work in that with our workshop groups, 10 to 20 people talking about what their experience has been both in human rights, equity, diversity, themselves in the workplace. It was powerful because it really brought activists to the fore. From there, we had caucuses, GLBT, I don't think we had a T2QS on the end of it. You know what I mean, equity.

RM [00:23:32] It's hard to keep adding initials.

GN [00:23:34] Yes, workers of colour, women's, workers with disabilities and various caucuses and to really make a space for, not only the issues coming forward, but for members to meet and then to self-determine, which I felt was very important. We wouldn't say, this is what we think you need, but you would come in to a bargaining conference or to regional, conventions, caucus or something and identify what those needs are. You did need the research and I think trends were within workplaces, of course, to build what you're going to take to the table. I think issues of the membership as workers and then trying to find a, family and work life balance were really important too. That was important as well to build the core of activists, because if you couldn't support some of the other things that were happening in our members' lives they couldn't identify and take part at the time.

RM [00:24:47] Which goes to show that unions are more than just wages and working conditions, right?

GN [00:24:51] Absolutely.

RM [00:24:52] That seemed to be what your interest was apart from those bread and butter issues.

GN [00:24:56] Yeah. I'm really mindful of and appreciating that because when I compared that, for instance, to my first job in the bank, I didn't last very long and I didn't like it. I didn't like the feeling of it. I thought, no, I want to be in a union workplace. I think that'll be a very positive thing. I had the opportunity. I think timing in many ways, I think timing for myself too, in the jobs that I got, the positions I got to move into, but also wonderful support from mentors and sisters.

RM [00:25:36] You were listened to. Sometimes unions set up these committees, but they're not really listened to because we're the big people.

GN [00:25:46] Yeah, how big and how tough and how loud?

RM [00:25:48] You felt that the BCGEU was open to all these other issues?

GN [00:25:52] I did. Yeah, I did.

RM [00:25:54] It wasn't a struggle?

GN [00:25:55] No, if there was a struggle, it might have been in my own self-confidence. There was always that. I still remember going to the mic for the first time. I believe it was Cliff Andstein behind me. He just said a little, just a little support under my elbow there, and John encouraging and Diane Wood. I remember at the Federation of Labour Women's Committee, Mary Rowles was director there at the time, it was my first meeting, so I was listening. She just kind of tapped and said, 'How about you? What have you to say?' It's one of those things that's an encouragement. I tried to be that as well for people, but I remember those folks in particular for that.

RM [00:26:51] As you became more experienced within the union, did you become more conscious of the fact that you were a minority, if I could put it that way, and that you were blazing new ground?

GN [00:27:01] No.

RM [00:27:02] Okay.

GN [00:27:02] I don't because I think I kind of look, and my spouse who's not Asian, not Chinese, he would ask me things in early times. I said, no, from my eyes looking out, I'm part of the mainstream. We grew up as we did so I wasn't so aware. In fact, I think more of that awareness is now or through it, when there's time to explore a bit of history. I think a bit of a bratty kid. I didn't want to go to Chinese school. My brothers—

RM [00:27:39] You and 98 percent of other Chinese kids and then they regret it.

GN [00:27:43] Yeah. My Dad would say, don't you want to meet other Chinese kids? Well, I've got three brothers and a sister. It wasn't a pushing away from but actually a growing up and out, I suppose. Now I'm proud of and happy to be and, finding out more. The story I told of Nai Xi was a discovery in later years rather than the early ones, when my dad would say we should go to the temple once a year and pay respect. Interestingly, within that structure, too, the names of those who followed Nai Xi were recorded, but only the males, so my sister and I were thinking, we're not there, why would we go?

RM [00:28:41] Gayle, did I notice on your CV that you were also a staff rep in Prince George?

GN [00:28:46] I was.

RM [00:28:46] For how long?

GN [00:28:47] About two and a half years.

RM [00:28:50] What was that like? Was it a bit of a culture shock?

GN [00:28:52] It was. I remember the first week someone came in and looked around and says, 'Where's the man?'

RM [00:29:05] Prince George, eh?

GN [00:29:07] I said, 'Well, I'm the man.' It's just kind of funny. Again, it was one of those lucky happenstances. My spouse had just finished an MPA, got a job at City of Prince George, and I was the rep in Victoria. The rep in Prince George happened not to be too happy there. Somehow we'd gotten talking and I approached John who was president at the time and said, 'Could we switch, would it work?' Because we have, my husband and I had a young four-year-old about to go into kindergarten. He said, 'Well, why not?' I got to be the rep in the north. We'd go out to Fraser Lake to negotiate with the CIBC. That was daunting.

RM [00:30:02] Were they surprised when you showed up?

GN [00:30:05] I think there was some prep, but, yes, I think they were. They were. I got to know people quickly very well and many wonderful friends.

RM [00:30:23] When was that Gayle?

GN [00:30:26] '89.

RM [00:30:30] That's where Diane Wood's from.

GN [00:30:33] Yes. Diane Wood's from there. Donna Sacuta worked with me.

RM [00:30:37] Who? Kidding.

GN [00:30:40] I know! That's so cool, huh? I didn't get to work with her for very long because they moved to Vancouver but I knew Brian in his time as an MP. That was exciting. I came back because of that education position.

RM [00:30:57] You wanted it.

GN [00:30:59] Yes, I wanted it. We adopted our daughter while we were there. Still remember the fax coming through from the consulate saying, 'To the glory of—' it was all in Chinese and then translated, 'We invite you to have this daughter of our country.' It was kind of chills and then at the end it says, 'How soon can you be here?'

RM [00:31:23] I'll ask you again about this but for you, there weren't many Chinese people in Prince George either, I would think.

GN [00:31:29] No, not many at all.

RM [00:31:30] Was that hard or were people accepting?

GN [00:31:34] I think there might have been a rumbling or two, but I think we just got to know one another and appreciate one another. I did search out other Chinese community members so that my daughter, our little one, she was just three and a half, but she spoke Mandarin. That's what the director at, they called it the people's house, he told me that she was a favourite (through an interpreter), that she was a favourite because she was so chatty. When we got back to Prince George, and I was still on a few more months leave, I searched out other community members, and it was a very welcoming community. We went to some welcoming luncheons and there was an IWA rep whose partner was from Beijing, so that was lovely. I don't think we would have met otherwise. There were a few connections in the community. Then there was a wide network of families with children

from China, and it was surprising there were four or five families in Prince George who had adopted little girls. I call them all princesses, Chinese princesses. If you cast a net for all of those across Canada and the U.S., I think there were thousands.

RM [00:33:03] When you think of Prince George you think of a pulp mill town and real resource industries, burly guys. There's you.

GN [00:33:14] I know. I had some strong support and introductions by those within my own admin services component because 12 area offices or areas spread across the province. I had friends and others who I'd served with who knew me and I didn't think of it. I didn't really find barriers.

RM [00:33:39] Do you remember anything you accomplished up there that you're sort of proud of, or is it more just the day to day?

GN [00:33:47] No. I got a good collective agreement at an agency called Aim High that was working people in community with disabilities, and then also group homes, so a collective agreement there. Then, a powerful but mighty group of stewards, one steward and three or four brave members against the CIBC in Fraser Lake for an agreement. That was tough.

RM [00:34:22] You mean the bank?

GN [00:34:23] Yeah. The bank.

RM [00:34:24] You organized the bank?

GN [00:34:25] No, no, she the steward, her name was Bobby and she organized five workers, herself and five workers. Boy, they took that really seriously. They flew out their HR person and regional managers. It was, that—

RM [00:34:45] I never heard about that. This is amazing.

GN [00:34:47] Yeah, it decerted.

RM [00:34:49] In Fraser Lake?

GN [00:34:49] Yeah, in Fraser Lake. The branch is still there but they would do things such as, well Vanderhoof doesn't have a unionized workforce, Fraser Lake does. They'd offer Vanderhoof a raise.

RM [00:35:03] You guys had to negotiate it.

GN [00:35:04] Yeah, we had to. Actually, it was just bare minimum. There was nothing, unfortunately, satisfying from the bank itself, but certainly among the steward and those members, I think of them as the Norma Rae's of the North. Then what happened after the steward went away on vacation is they decerted.

RM [00:35:29] That's so common.

GN [00:35:30] Yeah, and that was sad.

RM [00:35:32] Yeah. That is exactly what happens. There's turnover and then the bank marshals all its forces. You were negotiating face to face with all these head bank honchos? There's Gayle Nye?

GN [00:35:45] I have to say, it's not my forte. I don't have that kind of poker face and I'm not a very technical numer— I'd always have to call back in, 'Okay, here are these figures. Can you have a look?' I was fearful of missing something.

RM [00:36:02] You negotiated an agreement. That's great.

GN [00:36:06] It's okay. Yeah. The sad thing is it didn't last.

RM [00:36:09] No but still, because as I was saying, that has happened in just about every bank branch that ever gets organized. It's just so hard to keep it going. The fact that you got that collective agreement is a real achievement.

GN [00:36:22] It was at the time, but really, I have to say, it was much undermined by the fact of what they then did in the following, I think it was spring. She and her family, Bobby I can't think of her last name at this time, but still can see her sat in her house with all of the other members. There was real support, but there was also a wariness. You know who's watching us get together? I think it was a real tough organizing campaign. They had to do it in a quiet way, had to be sure of themselves in terms of someone else not going to tell management.

GN [00:37:07] Then I would say lifelong friends that we made in Prince George because it's a different kind of community. People showed up with a pie in our neighbourhood or you'd be out there, sub, I don't know, minus 20 playing snowballs or go hurdling down a hill. Our son just loved the snow. I don't think he'd seen much of it before we moved to Prince George.

RM [00:37:35] How long were you this education officer or the director of education?

GN [00:37:41] About ten, 11 years.

RM [00:37:44] Did you go on to anything after that or how did that work?

GN [00:37:48] Coupled with human rights and equity, those two programs together, so it was coupled, in terms of responsibility. Because the education, modules and approach to leadership included all of those, they just went along together. It might have been during a time where there were some cuts coming about or maybe the fact of my enjoying doing both that I took both of those on. Alongside it, I got to attend the Canadian Labour Congress for human rights and equity, women's committees. I would see some wonderful development of modules and that kind of work that would be then sent out to affiliates, and then get to be there alongside the activists from the Maritimes, from Ontario, Quebec, across the prairies. We did a wonderful few years of the summer institute for union women with SFU Labour Studies, Kate Braid.

RM [00:39:06] Kate Braid. One of my favorite people.

GN [00:39:08] I got her last book of—

RM [00:39:11] She's just such a great person.

GN [00:39:12] Yes. Those were wonderful years to me, highlight years, because we really worked hard to develop what the week would be like or what the program would be if we did.

RM [00:39:25] That reminds me. Have we interviewed Kate Braid? We should.

GN [00:39:27] You must, you must, and thank you. Say hello.

RM [00:39:30] Yeah. When you look back in those years, can you think of any breakthroughs that you made or was it again more the day to day, or anything that stands out?

GN [00:39:43] There were tough times in terms of sort of the admin and organizing but I think what was powerful about it was the might of various women and their experiences and women in trades. We didn't get to experience and know about how tough that was. Women in trades and that work, or women who are flaggers on the road and they would talk about what their experience would be. It would strengthen us in terms of recognizing the might and the rights that we have and powerful in that way. My daughter always talks about being dragged around to those things, because we also made sure that there was childcare, some childcare that wasn't just everyone in a room watching a video but something that was going to be meaningful or engaging that they'd be included or could be with us when we went to different sessions. She used to say, 'You'd bring me to those places that put me in a room.'

RM [00:40:51] Watching a video.

GN [00:40:52] The kids. I think even then she had some, so it broadened us all.

RM [00:41:02] This reminds me what you're talking about is the changing nature of the union. You've seen it change.

GN [00:41:07] Yes.

RM [00:41:08] There were no women in trades in the trade components when you started. What kind of an impact did that have? It certainly must have changed your job.

GN [00:41:19] There were more stepping up. There were more having a voice, more developing skills and as well moving into positions both in staff but also as officers and certainly as stewards. I would say now that the percentage of membership, I haven't checked recently, but I would say, it's 55, more than 50%, who are women even in those so-called non-traditional occupations. That's very good. I think it's still a tough go in trades. I think it's still very difficult, that's what I had heard and read. I think there's also a creative way to problem solving and I think as well, more time is taken to listen. It might take more of that time even in those, in regional meetings or whatever sessions. I think that's been very important to really go beyond what the policy says about welcoming diversity, but to really make it part of the organization.

RM [00:42:37] Yeah, you could pass all the resolutions you want, but on the ground is another thing, right?

GN [00:42:42] Yes. That's what I love about the GEU and the affiliates too. The thing is that it's passed as policy, so off you go. Whereas recently working in nonprofits, I went to a multiracial and Indigenous girls and women's network to do some facilitating and to serve on a board for a bit of time, but we're always writing for grants, always writing for grants. The comparison is that the labour movement makes a commitment through policy at convention. Then off you go. I think that's a wonderful thing. You try and keep that in parallel with the priorities of bargaining, the priorities of we might be facing with legislation coming down on various things.

RM [00:43:38] Tell me about the Asian Canadian Labour Alliance in B.C. That sounds really impressive. What's that all about?

GN [00:43:45] Early years.

RM [00:43:46] 30 years?

GN [00:43:47] Early years. I believe it has been 20 at least. We counted the 20th anniversary in 2020, I think.

RM [00:43:59] What is it? Was it something you organized or how did that work?

GN [00:44:02] Part of the founding members. It was, as identified probably in various unions at HEU, at PSAC, UFCW and other places, we did find there were Asian activists in various places, some doing organizing, some who were reps as well, or officers. We thought we should meet up, talk about what the experience is or what's going on. From that, slowly we started to grow. First, a social. Then a call-out for thoughts, ideas. I think we were first approached by APALA, Asian Pacific American Labour Alliance. Somebody that we knew through, UCLA Labour Studies and Canadian Labour Congress, Ontario director. We're friends. We got invited to an Asian Pacific American Labour Alliance convention in San Francisco. I found myself on the wharf at the Fisherman's Wharf with a hachimaki and a picket sign. Hachimaki in those days, to me, was very radical, wearing that headband. It was somebody jumping up in the back of the truck saying, 'There's more here than fish that stinks.' Ever inspired. That was Kent Wong of the UCLA Labour Studies.

RM [00:45:40] It must have been an eye opener to you.

GN [00:45:41] It was. It was.

RM [00:45:43] It's not just me.

GN [00:45:44] Yeah. I went into a convention hall with about 500 people. I was sitting beside a Filipino American who had a southern drawl in the way he talked. Everyone with various issues, service employees, various others doing some organizing and then I met Pacific, they called it Pacific Northwest activists from Seattle. Then we thought, we've got to do this in Canada. We need to set up either a chapter or organize for ourselves, which we did. Each union, we found or asked the Federation of Labour for some meeting space and some time and booked several meetings. Sometimes we'd be hosted. We hosted one at GEU, but there were other unions that would host events such as in May, Asian Heritage Month. I think that was maybe a kickoff event that we had back in early '90s.

RM [00:47:01] What did you focus on? Were the issues different that you talked about?

GN [00:47:07] Those of us who were reps had various work issues and balancing to talk about, but I think we focused on how we could grow, how we could reach out, how we could find others. Took part in a stewards' training in Cantonese, which was powerful because I've got maybe a kid's, toddler's vocabulary. I can't speak it, but I could understand bits. We did that with, I held it with international garment workers. They were doing some stewards' training. We did that and some there got more members on the list. Just finding one another in different places. The downside or the difficult part was balancing workload. So many of us were doing this off the corner of our desks. From attrition and changes in responsibility and moving on it faltered for a time, but it's been kicked off again in 2020. It's got a whole new, young people, creative people, social media users. It is fabulous.

RM [00:48:41] Isn't that great? You must feel proud about that.

GN [00:48:45] Yeah. I hadn't thought about it for a few years because I've been retired now for 15 years. To be invited back, but to see it too and how broad the organizing is, how broad the issues are, how creative. It's wonderful. Yeah.

RM [00:49:07] Did you make a difference when you were involved, do you think?

GN [00:49:11] I'm not sure.

RM [00:49:15] It was something people really found useful, right?

GN [00:49:20] I think so. I'm good at interconnecting and establishing rapport and space. That's what equity is about. You make a space and you move over and then you grow in that way.

RM [00:49:35] Did you feel it was needed or did you just think this is a good idea?

GN [00:49:38] Oh, I think it was needed.

RM [00:49:40] Why do you say that?

GN [00:49:44] When you look across at the leadership who is representative and no disrespect, but just that there could be some more diversity there. In that way, it's relevant, it's relatable to the broad membership. I think that's as well in politics or in any place, if you see yourself reflected, you're more likely to step up.

RM [00:50:09] Would you go to lobby unions and say you need more diversity?

GN [00:50:13] I did back in the day. I've been to the Victoria Labour Council a few times. I had a recent stint or more recent stint. I'm working as the labour coordinator for United Way Greater Victoria. Somebody just said, you've got time. I did go back for a couple of campaigns. It's problematic. I don't think that there's much support or welcoming within labour in that organization. 'It's okay. You can sign on for payroll deductions and contribute.' That's great, but I don't think there was a very strong listening ear to workers and workers' rights there.

RM [00:50:59] At the United Way I was going to ask you about that. People don't know that unions are involved to the extent that they are in the United Way. They think union strikes, greedy and so on. How did you find that work?

GN [00:51:17] I quite liked it in terms of organizing groups and meetings and encounters. I'm not very good at asking for money and they wanted that person. I said, 'I'll work with the unions. The unions will bring people and we'll take part.' I wasn't a campaigner. I'll say, personally, is that I was very unhappy with management there, and I didn't like what was happening to a new young worker who had come from India, worked in United Way in Mumbai, so knew very much about campaigns in a very different way, but in the broad way. She couldn't drive but I, as the labour coordinator, drove all over the place so we coupled up. When it came to her probationary period, they pointed out that she couldn't. They let her go and I was pretty disturbed by that. I was irate. I, well before that happened, voiced that concern. It was just a deaf ear, adherence to the job description in the contract. I think what was underlying it was they just they didn't want to hear from either labour coordinator or steward or that member or anything. I thought, I don't need this.

RM [00:52:48] Yeah. Right.

GN [00:52:50] I felt a real disrespect for the labour movement and not from the previous CEO who had left. I came on during that period, but the ensuing couple of directors, and then I had heard through the CLC and its coordinator for all of the United Ways, we're having a real tough time. I'm not sure where it's at.

RM [00:53:13] Yeah. Vancouver's also experienced some of that, too.

GN [00:53:16] Yes.

RM [00:53:17] Used to be really close in Vancouver.

GN [00:53:19] I got to know and work with people there. There'd even be some coordination for coming up to the Pacific Region winter school at Harrison. They would come out and do a community-building.

RM [00:53:34] Who's the guy with the cowboy hat?

GN [00:53:38] Melvin. Marvin.

RM [00:53:39] Marvin. Yeah, great big guy. He was just fabulous.

GN [00:53:42] Yes.

RM [00:53:44] I remember his name because he was involved with the Labour Heritage Center. What you're saying, there's still battles to be fought, right?

GN [00:53:50] Oh, there are, it's true. If there are those times, like, there was a call for a picket line at Cascadia Liquor the other day, so I went, things like that. If I get wind of it, what perhaps happens is that once you've been away and you fall off various lists, you don't always hear, but if you get to hear about it.

RM [00:54:16] You haven't given up.

GN [00:54:17] No, no.

RM [00:54:20] Gayle, you spent your lifetime in the labour movement, I wonder if you look back and think about the lows and the highs and a life well lived, what kind of a legacy have you left? What do you think, looking back?

GN [00:54:35] For me, it's true, my work life has been in the BCGEU and from BCGEU to community. I think that there's a real partnership there. You do have less say once you step out and step away. I like to have a say. I like to make sure that when I do, others along with me have a say as well, so maybe there's a bit of that. For my family, for my kids, I think that certainly our son, who's an HEU member, he works in occ therapy, he recognizes the value of unions and unions' work and benefits. For myself and my spouse and family, there's a certain security, but there's also a positive sense of contributing where we can. I do think, though, I've been both with timing and luck, perhaps, in a good place to take on those challenges.

RM [00:55:51] Because the BCGEU was open to it at that time.

GN [00:55:54] Yes.

RM [00:55:55] Whereas 20 years earlier, perhaps it might have been a different story.

GN [00:56:00] Yeah. It might very well be.

RM [00:56:02] Go ahead.

GN [00:56:03] I think about when I moved from being a job steward at the Medical Services Plan onto what was the occupational component of reps from around the province, admin services and then from what's called the provincial executive, it wasn't diverse whatsoever. Certainly there were no Indigenous representatives. I think there was more of a push and resistance there. We encouraged and supported, but I think it was a tough road for Indigenous activists. I heard that voiced. It was somebody leaving as I was coming on. They were pretty resistant and I didn't know the person well enough, but I thought, oh, we've got to change things. There was some not so covert racism. I think there was some expression of disregard. I thought, we've got work we can do, but I really felt there was strong support that way from John and from the rest of the exec. It was great being part of a feisty crowd and some great women to be working with because it's true, the composition of those on staff was changing.

RM [00:57:28] I look at your record and I notice you didn't go for the big leadership positions. You weren't one of the head bargainers or anything like that. You were sort of there and you were always working for equity and minorities and people. There were human rights. What drove you to do that?

GN [00:57:51] I'm not so sure. But my husband will tell you that I'm the shop steward for our dog (laughter) at home.

RM [00:58:01] That's the kind of person you were.

GN [00:58:02] I don't know. He said that the other day because he was getting after him about something, and I spoke up, but, I'm not so sure. I think there's a sense of the

security and support, of course, and the positives that come from that and also conveying that.

RM [00:58:24] You're on the side of the people that sometimes have to struggle.

GN [00:58:27] Oh, yes. It's true. Very much so.

RM [00:58:34] Can you look back on your years in the union and point to specific things that you helped change? You had an impact on the union, don't you think?

GN [00:58:46] I did. I was part of it, in the weave, happy to be appreciating it, listening. I'd speak up if I felt something was wrong. That was hard. It's not a natural to jump up to a mic, but I will say, if you can counter that along with some of the other things that are happening in our lives. I will say as well that what we try to weave in is some culture, some storytelling, some aspects of history. One of the most powerful sessions I attended at the Summer Institute was not a panel, but an evening presentation where quilt making was explored through time and how messages would be sewn into, in the southern U.S., messages would be sewn into the edges of quilts or that the arpilleras that came from Chile had little pockets with messages that were being sent out as those were being made to sell. Those ways in which we can have culture and our own creativity provide a message. I've been playing Japanese taiko for 20 years. I love it, so now I can wear one of those hachimakis, one of those things. It still reminds me of being on the Fisherman's Wharf in San Francisco in that demonstration. So I'm there.

RM [01:00:37] And you're still on the line.

GN [01:00:39] Yeah, when there's a chance. When things come up, I am, and I'll hope my grandkids are like that, too. We're grandparents of three now.

RM [01:00:52] I'm sure they will be if you have anything to do with.

GN [01:00:55] Yeah. They're descending in July. They're coming out from Saskatchewan.

RM [01:01:00] Is there anything else you'd like to add that we haven't touched on? Talk about?

GN [01:01:07] I would just like to add that we keep on going and keep on being inspired by those who were before us, did that hard work, and then put our own print on it in terms of how that is. There isn't just that one way of being, but that our differences are our strengths.

RM [01:01:30] You may be modest about it, Gayle, but you're a pioneer.

GN [01:01:34] Thank you. It feels that way. Having reached age 70, I've said it. We were just with someone for a birthday party, and they were facing their 70th birthday, and with a little grin, I said, 'Look, declare it, that experience comes along with all of that.' It's been very good, very empowering. Then I hope in doing that, it brings more and the wave of those young ones is inspiring as well.

RM [01:02:09] Excellent. Thank you so much. Great getting to know you.