Interview: Gary Steeves (GS)
Interviewer: Ken Novakowski (KN)
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Transcription: Marie Decaire

KN: [00:00:02] So welcome. Gary, we are here today to interview Gary Steeves, a long time B.C. Government Employees Union staff person. This interview is taking place on Thursday, October the 4th, 2018. The interview is being done by Ken Novakowski, with technical assistance from Lesley Harrington. So Gary, hi. We want to just start by asking you some questions about your coming into this world in your very early years, like where and when were you born?

GS: [00:00:36] I was born in Moncton in 1950; one of the last kids born in the old Moncton Hospital. I have a family of...I was the oldest of three kids, two younger sisters. So my mom and dad both worked in Moncton.

KN: [00:00:56] And were they.. did you have any kind of union politics or progressive politics in your family as a background?

GS: [00:01:03] Oh, yes. My dad was deeply involved in his union, packinghouse workers union, United Packinghouse Workers, UPWA, and he was President of the Atlantic Council, of packinghouse workers, and then became President of the Canadian Food and Allied Workers. The packinghouse workers was a CIO union and it merged with the meat cutters and butcher workers, which was an AFL union. And so they created a new union, the Americans called, the Amalgamated Meat Cutter, Butcher Workers and Packinghouse Workers of America. And the Canadian section said, we want a Canadian name, so they called themselves the Canadian Food and Allied Workers. So my dad was President of the Atlantic Council, and my mother was the first Secretary of the NDP and in 1961, Provincial Secretary in New Brunswick. And my dad was the chair of the New Party Committee in 1960, you know, when they were the CCF was evolving into the NDP, so that my parents were very active in politics and the union.

KN: [00:02:07] So that explains a bit of what you grew up with and the kind of politics you were subjected to.

GS: [00:02:11] Yeah.

KN: [00:02:12] Okay. So maybe you could go on from there and tell us a bit about your school experience. And I'm assuming you went to school in Moncton and what you did after your finished your school?

GS: [00:02:25] Yeah, I graduated from Moncton High School and then I went to Mount Allison University in Sackville, New Brunswick. I was involved in politics at university, but it was just on the periphery of things. I would come home and work. My mom and dad always worked in provincial and federal election campaigns. So I always came home. And I mean, I remember all through college, you know, canvassing and working in election campaigns and stuff. So I was, but when I finished university, I was the.. I guess it would be the 19.. I guess I finished in '72 and I guess the '74 election I'd been working in British Columbia, I'd gone to work. Well, it wasn't my first union job. My first union job was in

Monkton with Local 50 of CUPE working on the back of a garbage truck. So I did that for two summers and then I hitchhiked out west, you know, in the summertime when I was going to university and to work in mines. So I was in the Steelworkers in Thompson working at Inco. And then I was caught up in Campbell River in the fight between the Canadian Paperworkers Union and PPWC. That's when the American, two big American unions, the Paper Workers and the Pulp Sulphite were doing a merger in Canada. The Canadian sections wanted to break away. So I got caught up in all of that. That was kind of an education to B.C. union politics. But then I went back in '74, I went to Ottawa and I went to work in the House of Commons for an NDP MP. So I worked there. I worked in the House of Commons for five years. But in that Caucus was Tommy Douglas and Stanley Knowles, and it was like.. boy, what an education that was. And so I really enjoyed that. And it kind of got me hooked.

KN: [00:04:41] Which <unclear>

GS: [00:04:41] I worked for Cyril Symes. He was a New Democrat MP for Sault Ste. Marie. He was the communications critic. I did a lot of work with the communications unions in Ontario and of course he had big paper and Steelworkers locals in Sault Ste Marie. So I worked with a lot of individual local unions at the time.

KN: [00:05:05] So you're in Ottawa. How did you get back out to B.C. and join the BCGEU?

GS: [00:05:12] Well, I met my wife, Marina Horvath, who was a Bank Workers organizer for the CLC. And she was a friend of John Fryer. So we had dinner one night, when Marina and I were going out together. And Fryer said, come on out to B.C., you know, you should have a look at our union. Maybe you want to come to work for us. And I said, Oh, you know, I didn't think much of it... and Marina was from Vancouver. So we then decided that we'd move to B.C. and I was hired by the BCGEU. I had to stay until the 1979 federal election because I promised to manage Cyril Symes re-election campaign. So we got him re-elected and moved to B.C. And yeah, so John Fryer hired me as a research officer for the BCGEU.

KN: [00:06:08] Can you tell us some of your early years in the BCGEU as a research officer?

GS: [00:06:12] Well. The very first job I had as research officer, was to defend a three-year collective agreement that the union had negotiated. And then everyone else coming along behind had negotiated a bit better. And if you remember, 1979, 1980, inflation through the roof. So the collective agreement was to cover '79, '80, '81. We had, you know, 15% inflation each year, and it shattered the purchasing power of workers, particularly in our union. So there's a lot of membership heat. So I was involved in doing research to sort of defend what the decisions that were made in 1979, but also to prepare the bargaining committee for the 1982 round of collective bargaining. And in 1982, prior to 1982, the BCGEU had never had a provincewide general strike of all of its members. It had taken out a liquor store group at one time, or occupational groups of one nature or another had been out. Previously... But the master bargaining unit per se had never been on strike at the same time. So that was a big undertaking. And, at that time the Socreds had - my words - gerrymandered, the Public Service Labour Relations Act to make it that, for a strike vote in the public sector, had to have 50% plus one of all eligible voters. Not of people who voted, but of eligible voters. So that meant if a member did not vote, it basically counted against you, as basically a no vote. So we had to find the master

bargaining unit had 49,000 and change members, and at the time we had to find them. Well, they're mobile crews and they're, you know, in in Forest Lookout Towers and, you know, behind McKenzie. So we had to find our membership in a massive way and make sure they all voted. And it was terrific because we; all the headquarters staff, we all get sent out in the field. And so we got to work with locals and go a little town to a little town. And we organized geographically and we found about 99% of the members. It was a fabulous experience and it led to a strike in 1982 and we beat the government. And I to this day believe that Bill 2 really came about because of the BCGEU success at the bargaining table in '82 that the government just decided they were going to fix that in 1983.

KN: [00:09:05] Well, can you tell us a bit about that strike in 1982. How long did it last? And obviously, it had a positive impact on the bargaining table.

GS: [00:09:18] Yeah. The theme of bargaining that year was, catch up - keep up, because they had fallen behind the three-year agreement. So the catch up was a significant wage increase and the keep up was a cola clause.

KN: [00:09:36] So is it a one-year agreement?

GS: [00:09:39] No, it was it was a two-year agreement. It expired. Uh, October 1st. October 1st, 83. So there was a retroactive activity to it. So, I'm trying to remember. I can't remember all the details of what happened. Of the details of the collective agreement in '82. But it did catch up. It did. And there was a lot of bottom loading. So it collapsed a lot of wage scales and it brought lower workers up. So there was more pressure on the higher paid guys to get more money next, and it was the higher paid workers were men and the lower paid workers were women. And it was just so... you know, it was a public sector bargaining that evolved from the 1950s. And it just, you could see the structural deficiencies of collective bargaining and management approaches, too. I mean, when I joined the union, they were just still talking about how wonderful it was to have women working in liquor stores. I mean. prior to the 1970s, Korean War veterans were the primary hiring group that went into liquor stores. Liquor stores were heavily, heavily veterans. And they, you know, and you could tell by the collective agreement. Your military service counted under the public service pension plan. So there was provisions. You could just see the nature of the bargaining unit and what the priorities of past bargaining committees and the priorities of previous governments. The government really, I think, wanted to keep its employees out of their hair politically and had taken measures, you know, to do that.

KN: [00:11:40] So you started off as a researcher by 1982, were you still a researcher? At what point did you move?

GS: [00:11:47] No, I was a researcher for about three or four months. And then I started doing arbitrations, handling grievance arbitrations for the social education and health sector component of the union, which was mainly employees of the Ministry of Human Resources, Grace McCarthy's Ministry, and some Attorney General, some probation officers and so on, and a smattering across other ministries. But I, and that's how I ended up involved in Tranquille... was because of my work with, you know, the head of social education and health services component. So I became acting Assistant Director in, in early 1983. And Cliff Andstein was the Director, and there was a vacancy, and they just needed someone to fill it while they went through a, you know, posting procedure. I wasn't going to be hired, but I was in the job when, you know when, 1983 happened, I just happened to be there. So that was that was all good.

KN: [00:13:01] So let's talk about that. 1983 happened. That, of course, is the year of Solidarity. And do you actually remember? When the budget on July 7th first came down with all the legislation, do you remember that happening? And if so, do you remember your reaction and the reaction of your colleagues on the staff of the GEU? .

GS: [00:13:25] You know, it's one of the things I remember, like it's yesterday I can see myself sitting in an office on the third floor of the BCGEU building the way it was, there was telexes then, and the telex was going and it was spitting out the names of the Bills that were being tabled. And then we... our Victoria office couriered over the actual copies of the Bill, and I remember Cliff, the Director was, he was on vacation, he was in Minnesota. And the only two, there was three departments, three Directors, three Assistant Directors in those days. And the only Directors or Assistant Directors that were around, were Jack Adams and me. And so Jack said, We're going to have an Officer meeting at the Fed tomorrow. We need an analysis of all this legislation. So I called the department together and we just divvied up the 26 Bills and we did an analysis. I think there's eight or nine staff people in the department at the time. So we did an analysis of the 26 Bills. We went through them in a group to make for accuracy, and it was some things we just didn't understand. In all those bills about how the Medical Services Commission was structured and stuff, so we had to call people, but so we put together a binder for the Fed officers to say, here's what this is. And it was just a massive assault on everything that was decent. So we put the binder together and Jack, we had the mailroom working late into the evening making, I don't know, 50 or 60 copies, whatever it was, off down to the Officers in the morning. And so that was July 7th and the officers met July 8th. Yeah, I remember it like it was yesterday.

KN: [00:15:19] So, soon after that, you were informed that an institution that you were responsible for in your staff assignment in Kamloops, Tranquille, was going to be closed. Can you tell us about that experience, how that happened and what your immediate reaction was to hearing that news?

GS: [00:15:44] It was a middle mid-July, was like a week, ten days later, on July the 8th, in this massive assault, Grace McCarthy had announced.. issued a press release saying that Tranquille was going to close. So we knew that the government planned to close it. And because the government closed other institutions at Bellevue and Skeenaview and there was a lot of social pressure to de-institutionalize. So I wasn't surprised by that. They called my office, the Ministry of Human Resources, and they were down on just off West 12th. Just down past the hospital, MHR had an office building and said, you know, we need to speak to you about this press release and what our plans are. So we thought it was, you know, five years from now, we're going to close and.... So Jack just said, Gary, you deal with the Ministry, you go, you'll know what they're talking about. So I went by myself and on the way down I thought, you know, I should have someone here that knows - I'd never been to Tranquille - I didn't know much about Tranquille, I'd never been to the institution physically. So I wish I had someone here who knew, you know, a bit more.. Anyway, oh well, I'll just take notes and we'll come back and we'll put a group together like we usually do, and problem solving. And we get at it and.I don't know what I was thinking. It was the summertime, everyone's on vacation. It was a beautiful sunny day. I get down there and they have the senior managers and the most senior human relations people, and there's a gang of like six of them sitting there. There's me. And so I joked. I thought you guys were senior. What are you doing? Uh, you know, what are you guys doing here? Working in the middle of July. Like, you know, like I thought you were senior. I'm junior. That's why I'm here. And so we got to work, and they said, look.. they laid out this thing about how Tranquille was falling apart. It needed huge capital investment. They didn't use

that word, but they needed a lot of money to fix it. And they weren't going to. And they were going to close it. I said, Oh yeah, and when is this going to happen? And they said, Well, it's going to happen by the end of this year. It'll be closed by the end of 1983. And I think December '83 was their target date. And I said, and I'm thinking about the collective agreement, you know in the union, everything is everything is... you deal with everything in documents. It's a contract. It's a constitution. It's bylaws. It's a resolution from convention.. like everything is laid out. You know, it's very structured. So I'm thinking of the collective agreement. So I said, well, under the collective agreement, we'll have to form a joint committee to oversee your ceasing operation. The collective agreement said that the government had the right to create new services or to conclude services depending on what they wanted to do as the Crown. So they really had a right to close it if they wanted to. But if you close something, there was a process and it was a joint committee and it dealt with classifications of employees and alternate job offers and, you know, layoff notices and severance pay and all of those kinds of things. And they said, oh, no, we're not doing that. I said, Well, yeah, you are going to do that. They said, No, we have no intention of having a joint committee because as soon as Bill 3 passes, we're going to fire them all. I said, What? I was completely stunned. They said, no, no, we are going to fire people. One of the managers, long time manager, a very senior guy named Terry Piper, had been an ex Priest.. or he'd been a Priest in a previous lifetime, and now he wasn't a Priest and he was a senior manager. I said, Terry, you're not going to walk into the City of Kamloops and fire over 600 people. Does that MLA, that Socred MLA in Kamloops, actually. want to be re-elected? I mean, this is completely insane. Our members will go nuts. City of Kamloops will go crazy. It's the third largest employer in Kamloops that gets massive economic impact on that town in that region. And if you remember, 1983, the unemployment rate in B.C. was 15%. The unemployment rate in Kamloops was 20%. I mean, Kamloops was struggling. And you're going to lay off, you're going to fire 600 people, who've given you nothing but service for 20, 25, 30 years? Anyway, I was stunned, so I couldn't get out of there fast enough. I just said, you guys are crazy. I'm out of here. And I left. I said, do you have anything else to tell me? Anything else you want to give me, or you want to tell me? Nope. We've told you what we called you for.

GS: [00:21:06] So I jump to my car and I'm racing across town. And of course, I go through an orange light and T-bone a guy who turned in front of me, and my mind was somewhere else. So I said to the cop, I got to get to my office, you can't believe. I got to get to my office! He goes, well, just give me your license. He writes my license plate number down and my information, and he reaches down and he pulls the fender off - it was jammed in on the tire. He pulls the thing off the tire, he says, there you can go. So I got back to the office, called Cliff and called Jack. I sat down with them and said. You can't believe it.. here's what they're going to do. And Jack said, well you've got to go to Kamloops. Get on the plane right now. And this meeting was 2:00 in the afternoon and I'd probably been back in the office by 4:00. I jumped on a plane at 6:00 and flew to Kamloops. I called our staff. We had two staff reps in Kamloops, in the Kamloops area office. Dave MacPherson and Al Lowndes and. I said. I told them what I had learned. And Dave MacPherson is a superb organizer. I mean, Dave McPherson was just the creme de la creme of an organizer. So he said, well what does Jack say? Because Jack Adams, in our union, Jack was a superb tactician and strategist. I mean he, you know,,, someone once said that, he always used a blunt instrument when a scalpel would do. But.. and he was kind of blunt and he was kind of, you know, he was a Korean War veteran. He was quite militaristic and quite in-your-face, but he was brilliant at knowing where the buttons were and knowing if you did this, what they were going to do. And he had the countermoves. You know, he was always two steps ahead of everybody. In my experience, I enjoyed working with him. And he said, you just can't go into Kamloops and

drop this bombshell on our 600 workers and then get on the plane and leave town. So, oh okay. Well, what are we going to do? Says Gary Steeves through, you know, what four years on staff with the BCGEU? He said, I think you got to have them just sit down and stay right there. No one goes back to work. You just sit right down right there. Sit in. And I said. Well, I read about the UAW sit ins in the '20s and '30s or whatever. And I said, yeah but people only sit so long and then you got to get up and stretch your legs, like, what are we going to do? And he said, Well, you figure it out. So I called Dave MacPherson and told him and Dave said well, let's call it an occupation. Okay. So we're going to occupy the place. Okay. Here's what we're going to do. You figure out; you designate some buildings. I'll go. I'll lay it out and then we'll ask the membership. There was six locals there, so there's a membership of six locals. What they want to do, we had the Chair of the biggest local, Chair the meeting and I went in and we got there. And of course, it's the summertime. It's supper time. And in 2 hours you want to have a meeting and you want 200 or 300 people at the meeting. So I got there and I said, Dave, how do we get.. He said, well, we got a hold of most of the local officers and they know we're calling them the Stewards. and the Stewadts networks have been triggered. And, you know, I guess we're doing the best we can.

GS: [00:25:04] So we got there. We walked down the road into the dining hall and they were out the doors and out the windows. And they, you know, there was just a lot of people. And Bill Rhode was the Chair local 205, which is the Hospital & Allied Services local. It's the care aides and the dietary workers and the laundry workers and the people that do the really hard work of the hard physical work. The place was full, dining hall was full, had a table up front and you had to sort of stand up on the table to be heard. And so then Bill called the meeting to order and you could have heard a pin drop. And then Bill introduced me and the others, you know, and most of the workers knew the local staff. So I just told them what happened. I just went through blow by blow the meeting and what they said and what was planned. And then I said. Do you have questions? Let's.. before we talk further, what questions do you have? Let's get them out on the table. So people ask questions like, Well, is this going to be for everyone? But the biggest question that everyone asked and asked, over and over and over again was... what's going to happen to these people we look after? But they were like teachers. They cared more about the kids than they cared about themselves. You know, they just said this is not right. So I said, look, I have a question. And we answered all the questions as best we could. And I said, I have a question for you guys. What do you want to do? You have choices. You can do nothing. Or you can fight back. And if you want to fight back, I got some ideas. But this guy stood up at the.. away at the back of the meeting. He stood up and he said, we don't have any choices here. I hear you, don't give me that. You know, we don't have any choices here. We're not going to take this and sat down. And it was like, I don't know, it was like it was all choreographed, you know? As he sat down, everyone else just stood up. And it was just this massive, you know, clapping and cheering and yeah, we're going to do something. And so then Dave and I explained, Well, we're going to do it. Let's consider Occupy the place, let's get rid of the bosses. Well, first we'll kick the bosses out. We'll send a little message to Bill Bennett that his world has changed. So they love that. And then the whole Shop Stewards started scheduling. You would work a shift, sleep in a shift in your workplace, and you would go home for a shift. So the shop stewards set up a roster for each workplace. The 9 to 5 daytime workplaces were really easy. The offices, because they were primarily women, they would come to work, they'd stay overnight and they'd go home, or they'd go home and then they come back and sleep 8 hours and then, you know, so that was really simple. The the dormitories and wards were more difficult. But for the workers, they just handled it all, there was schedules in every department. Within an hour, they had sentries on every door.

GS: [00:28:35] I said to Bill, we didn't know how to lock doors. Like I said, we may have to seal the doors off. And so I got this Saul Alinsky book I had just finished reading. I think it was Rules for Radicals. And they said, if you take a paper clip and you break the paper clip off and you slide that in the lock, it doesn't destroy the lock. It just prevents the key from going in. So all you need to do is have a little tiny magnet. You put it on the end, it slides out, you put your key in, but you've disabled the door. So I said to Bill, get a get a whole lot, get as many paper clips as we've got in the office. He said, paper clips! What do you want those for? So we had blank picket signs and paper clips and rope and everything we thought we needed piled into the back of Bill's station wagon. And then we called the bosses and said, you will not be allowed into work tomorrow. We had sentries on every door and even people who were delivering stuff, you know, food companies or whoever doing deliveries. If you didn't have a union card, you couldn't get on the property. And pretty soon, all these companies are saying, well, we're contracted over to here because they're union. This is great. But it worked very well. The other thing we did was we elected a council. And it had one or two representatives from every shift in every department. And this council, this occupation council made all the basic, all the big decisions. So it was good. It would meet, I think 4:00 every day, and it was unbelievably businesslike. It set out what we'd have a list of the decisions we need to make. I chaired the meeting, listened to the workers. What do you guys want to do? Well, we could do this and this. And like, one of the things, there was a fire department there. So they had a full fire department. They had a BC Buildings Corporation, full maintenance shop there. And then I said to the BC guys like, how do you do that? What do you do? How does something broken, how does it get fixed? And a BCBC guy said, well you know... I said like that doorknob gets broken. How does that get fixed? Like, you just fix it? He goes, well, no. I fill in a little report. I give it to my foreman and my foreman gives this report to the manager. The manager approves it and approves a work order. A work order goes to the foreman. And then in the morning, the foreman will give a work order - that sometimes takes two or three days - but the doorknob will get fixed. I said, well, how do you want to do it? He goes, well we'd like to just fix the doorknob and let you guys deal with the paperwork. I said, then let's do that. You see something that's broken, you fix it, you give me the paperwork. I'll have it signed and shipped off to Victoria. So every day we let the managers come in on the back end of the property - and Tranquille's a huge property - and they had cottages in the old days when it was a sanitarium, they built cottages for the doctors. This would be the 1950s. So they had these, there's a couple of cottages left and they had nothing in them, no furniture, just bare little cottages. So we had all of the managers sit in one cottage, so we'd let them go there and they couldn't go anywhere else. So I would take over in the morning a big folder of everything for them to sign. You know, and then the secretaries would ship it to Victoria. Oh and they were just... Oh I don't know about that. I said, you're going to sign that or it's going to get a lot worse around here. Oh, okay. So you pretty well get into a groove until about halfway through the occupation. And what happened there was, you know how hot it is in Kamloops? I mean, hot in the summertime, and then this is July and August. So it's got down to a slightly under 100. I'm talking about the old, we're talking about the old temperature measurements now. Yeah. And it would be it would be the high 90s. You know, and you could sit outside at night, you know, in shorts and a t shirt and, you know, it's just beautiful.

GS: [00:33:17] But there was one Ward called the Greeves Ward, which were all cerebral palsy patients. And I got to know a few of them. I mean, they had great minds and they just had a body that didn't work particularly well. So they were, you know, significantly physical disabilities, but they were wonderful people and some of them wise beyond their years. And they had been.. BCBC had been keeping the air conditioning system going over the

years because it was on its last legs and they kept fixing it and <unclear>, you know, playing with it. And so one night I got a call actually was the first night I didn't sleep in the institution. I had got a hotel in downtown Kamloops. And just to get a break. And Marina was with me and the phone rings and this BCBC shop steward said, Gary, the air conditioning in Greeves has ceased to work. I said, Well, can you fix it? He goes, no. He said, we just we have working on it. We can't make it work, he said. We really need to... we really need a new system. And I said, oh, how are we going to do that? And he goes, well, there is one. It's in a warehouse in downtown Kamloops. It's been approved in the budget every year, for the last four or five years, but they never wanted to spend the money. So they've just... it's in the budget, they just haven't spent it. So I said, Is it in this year's budget? He goes, yeah. I said, well get a crew and get to that warehouse. Let's put in a new air conditioning unit, you know, the big unit that sits on the roof. So the BCBC guys got the crane out and they went downtown and got a new air conditioning unit. Took the old one off, put the new one on 9:00 in the morning. New air conditioning system. Beautiful. He said, you know, people are going to die if we don't fix this, people are going to die. And I said, you don't need to convince me, you know, let's do the right thing. Well, you couldn't believe the reaction of management when I took that piece of paper over in the morning for them to sign. They just went nuts, I said. You're prepared to let people die. You're more interested in budget and saving money and all of that than you are in the people that you're charged with looking after. So anyway, I said, Here's the drill. You can refuse to sign this. And if that's the case... Of course, there was a CBC and a CTV film crew followed us everywhere. They were there everywhere I went, they went. I said, we're going outside to that picnic table and we're going to have a debate right on television about this expenditure. And about how... and I'm going to tell people it's approved, Legislature's approved it, it's in the budget. You guys just want to torture people who have physical disabilities. I mean, they were off the wall. I mean, he was off the wall. And then when I threatened to drag him out in front of the cameras, he just said, okay, well, sign. And they signed it. And I was like...Oh, I was so relieved. And Dave McPherson and Bill Rhode and a whole bunch of the activists, like they were back at the office. They were just waiting for me to get back. What happened? He signed. Oh.so there was things like that. But it ran. The workers were marvelous. The workers knew what they were doing and they didn't need someone leaning over the shoulder telling them how to look after people.

KN: [00:36:55] But can you tell us a bit, Gary, that story is absolutely fascinating, but can you tell me a bit about.. what, who the patients were overall in this institution, number one? And number two, could you tell me something about the reaction of the community of Kamloops to what was happening?

GS: [00:37:14] The patients between.. things change in 1971. Tranquille had opened in 1906 as a TB sanitorium, and it operated until - as a private sanitorium - until 1921, when the government bought it and the government bought a neighbouring ranch and put two ranches together to make a bigger place. And they operated from 1921 to 1958. Then they closed it in 1958 when the number of TB patients had fallen to a level that didn't justify keeping the sanitorium open. So this goes to your second question. In 1958, when they closed it, Phil Gagliardi was the highways minister and MLA in Kamloops. Phil Gagliardi was almost strung up in town. Merchants and citizens demanded that Tranquille be reopened. It was such a huge economic driver and it also had very, very, very genuine social connections. So it was a huge political football and Gagliardi solved it and got the government out of trouble, by reopening it to take the overflow from Woodlands School in New West. So the reaction of the community in 1983 was much the same. You know, economic recession going on, high unemployment, you're in the dumps. You're going to fire 600 more...we're going to lose 600 more jobs here. So the community was very

supportive of the workers. So that's that side of it. What was the second part of the question?

KN: [00:38:53] Who were these people?

GS: [00:38:56] Well yeah, the patients. From '58 to '71 they were mainly people who were... whose handicaps or mental disabilities were on the milder, less severe spectrum. And so they were really heavy into education, training, occupational therapy, that kind of stuff. And in 1971 - but between 1971 and 1983 - the Ministry had placed 400 of those people, in group homes and other places around the province. Lot of them in Kamloops. And they were replaced by people with drastically more severe handicaps. And so they were people who required constant custodial residential care, who had a much lower ability to be placed in a community, because the supports that were needed were so expensive, it was it made no difference. You weren't saving any money by taking them out of an institution, which is what Grace McCarthy always wanted to do. What Grace McCarthy was about saving money here. This is what she was about. So you didn't save any money by putting those people in the community, necessarily. But Bill 3 made the difference. If you don't have to pay workers that if you can reduce the costs of shutting down an operation, then you really do gain something. And they were, that's what the Socreds were about. But the 80% in 1983, 80% of the residents of Tranquille were severely or profoundly handicapped, and the other 20% were probably, you know, cerebral palsy patients and so on. People with profound physical disabilities.

KN: [00:41:04] So how long did the occupation last, Gary? And sort of, what brought it to an end?

GS: [00:41:13] It lasted until August 10th. August 10th was the Empire Stadium rally. Um. Well, it ended for a number of reasons. One is that we got as much public relations, to be crass about it, we'd gotten, you know, the maximum amount of public relations Operation Solidarity fight back propaganda out of it as we could. The workers were getting tired. You know, you can only do that for so long and people need to get back to their normal lives. So workers were getting tired. And you could tell from the, you know, the occupation council was they were tired. And we had an agreement from the government that if we gave it back to them, there'd be no retaliation and there'd be no... So, the government was really on their knees begging basically, like, you know, can't we get... can we get back into normal business? And we had an agreement that the fate of Bill 3 and Bill 2 were going to be dealt with. You know, through the collective bargaining and strikes that were going to take place in the fall. You know that roster of, you know, BCGEU goes first and you remember all of that. So the lineup of unions prepared to walk out to force the government off its legislative agenda; we weren't going to make. The continuing occupation wasn't going to make that come any faster. And it seemed an appropriate time to let the workers have a rest before some more emotional events would take place in the fall. And, you know, we'd take the strike vote and go out and everything. And it just seemed like the right time.

KN: [00:43:10] So whatever happened to Tranquille after all was said and done, and we went through the strikes in the fall and everything else, what did happen to Tranquille and to the patients who were resident there?

GS: [00:43:25] Tranquille closed in 1985. So two years later, it closed. The patients are - I don't like "patients" because most of them weren't sick. These were just people with disabilities. It wasn't a hospital. It was an education. It was a locally they call it the

Tranquille School, and that's really what it was. It was an educational place for people who just weren't as smart as you and I. Didn't have the mental abilities that you have or I have. And they needed specialized support. They were placed in group homes. A large number of them in Kamloops in the Kamloops area, but some in different.. Depended, you know, if your parents were from Burns Lake you know, they tried to arrange a group home in Burns Lake for you to go to. So you're close to your family and so on. And that was partly due to.. I mean the government were just going to dump them. It was the union, after the fact that had set up a process to make sure that residents were looked after or we'd still be occupying the place, I think. You know, if you couldn't give the workers that, the workers wouldn't have given up on their own account. They would have fought to the very end for the people they looked after. But so some were transferred to Woodlands, some patients or patients, some of the residents were transferred to Woodlands, but most were put in group homes somewhere in the province. As for the staff, a lot of people retired. They were eligible, and some of them, the ones that wanted to continue to work transferred, a lot, transferred to Woodlands. A lot of staff moved down to the lower mainland. That was before we had the housing situation we have today. But some took other jobs like I know some of the fire department went to the UBC Fire Department. So the people that wanted to continue to work for the government exercised their options to fill vacancies around. And we had a joint committee that oversaw that. And so I was right, Terry Piper was wrong. But the staff either were placed on their jobs, retired and a very small number took severance and said, I'm going to go do something else. But... and those were likely, you know, probably less than three year employees, with less than three years seniority. Anyone with three years or more service seniority couldn't be laid off. They had to find a job for them if they wanted the job, and all they had to do was say yes, I want to stay, and then that triggered the process of finding something.

KN: [00:46:29] So I'm wondering whether there was anything else that you were involved in with respect to Solidarity that you'd like to talk about.

GS: [00:46:40] Not too much. I was, after that I was one of the Lower Mainland strike coordinators. Spent a large portion of my time learning where the schools were in Vancouver and setting up picket lines so teachers didn't have to go to work. Yeah, I was the lower mainland strike coordinator; I was one of the two lower mainland strike coordinators, so I spent the rest of my time just coordinating picket lines and strike activity.

KN: [00:47:10] So that was quite, quite the experience. And you continued to work for the BC Government Employees Union and obviously the budget that came with this legislation, brought about severe cuts. Tranquille was one of the services eventually cut, but many other services that were provided by government employees were cut as well. And this presented a bit of a challenge for the union that you were working for. Would you like to talk a bit about how the union responded to that challenge? Losing members...

GS: [00:47:50] In 1984, the BCGEU had a convention and they adopted a plan for the future called, I think it was called, Looking to the Future. I have a copy of it. And I still to this day, argue with some of my old colleagues, that it was the most important in the post Op Sol world, I think the most important convention document that the union ever adopted. And it set out a plan for the future. It set in place making organizing a priority, doing successor rights, following members wherever they went, organizing new workplaces. If you hired a BCGEU person, we're going to go in and organize that workplace and... it also called for the restructuring of the union. The Union at that time, you know, was I think, had one private sector component and all of it was in that and this was how to restructure the union to make room for organizing; give community health workers their own component

and give community social services their own component. It allowed us to organize. You know, in 1991, '92 and 1993 we organized 5000 new members a year in those three years. I mean, so that policy document really set the change of the union's structurally and.. it, so the short answer is, we organized our way out of it basically. And we said if you're going to have government employees doing work, you know, in the home support sector, then we're going to get the home support sector and that had its challenges. I mean, that kind of growth, we lost 15,000 members and, you know, in <unclear> and the restraint program of the Socreds. And we organized over a decade, we organized another 30,000, you bring 30,000 new people into an organization, you know, new locals, new executives, new servicing responsibilities, new financial demands, new education demands, training stewards and local officers. And, you know, it's, you know, you just you think through all the things. You're not dealing with people who have been in the union a long time. You're dealing many cases with people who don't speak English and it's the first time in the union. And it's theirs. Their organization, so you've got to provide them with an ability to uh, to make the union theirs and to be able to feel comfortable. And we did that and I'm quite proud of that. That was a big, big, big piece of work.

KN: [00:50:56] So this plan, in fact, dramatically changed the union.

GS: [00:51:01] It did, I think. I think it did in a very fundamental way.

KN: [00:51:10] So what role did you personally have throughout this, this whole transition of the union into a, you know, a new and different union?

GS: [00:51:21] Well, I was. I was Assistant Director of Membership services from 84 to 86. And so we were in the process of you know, Jack Adams was the Director. And so we're in the process of implementing this convention mandate. And then in 1986, Norm Richards didn't run again as President. John Shields became President and a lot of older staff retired. Jack Adams retired, oh, Jack Adams went to the Labour Board, I think. But he retired from the union, essentially. Cliff went to be Secretary Treasurer of the BC Fed. So there was a huge turnover. So a lot of the younger, what I call younger staff - my generation had to step up and take, you know, leadership roles in the union. And John Shields being brand new and I'm not saying anything about John, that John and I haven't talked about, but John would be the first to admit that his first term as President was a disaster. He just didn't have the... He just wasn't in sync with what how it was all working. And it really was starting to hit the ditch. And there was divisions in the membership and all the public sector guys didn't like the private sector guys. And, you know, some of the younger staff leaders were not as effective as the old guys were. So, John got re-elected after his first term by one vote. Guy ran off the floor and almost knocked him off he won by one vote. And he looked at us and said, “we've got to change this. This has to change. We need…this union needs stability and we need to change this.’ So we did. He brought Cliff Andstein back to be Director of Collective Bargaining. He put Cliff and Patrice Pratt and I in charge of going through the restructuring. And the Officer we worked with was Tom Kozar. And so we created new components. We went, we followed the mandate of that 1984 policy decision. And things got better. And then in the early '90s, I became Director. In the early '90s, Director of Organizing. And we changed the culture. We consciously decided we're going to change the culture of the union to an organizing culture. So we use an organizing model on basically everything we did. And that's another thing. I you know, I think we were very lucky to have the kind of people we had who understood how important organizing was. So that’s kind of the transition. You know, the transition was, it was bumpy at times. You know. Well, at times it was more than bumpy, but it worked. And we changed a lot of things. And then we came out, we're still here and the Socreds are history.

KN: [00:54:49] Okay. So is there anything else you want to say? About your remaining years with the GEU and any other changes like you obviously worked under John Shields and then you must have worked under George Heyman as well.

GS: [00:55:05] Yeah. Well, to go back to John. John became an amazing President after his first three years, as Cliff said, he got his training wheels off. Once he got his training wheels off, he was unbelievable. He was as good a leader as you could ever hope to be around. He just he was just great. He understood stuff. He caught on. He led. He gave people their space to do their work. Like, one of the things I'm personally proud of is he sent me to this conference at NUPGE in Ottawa about environmental plans for unions. And so I came back, he said, What did you learn? And I said, well, I learned that we're the only province in the country that doesn't have beverage container legislation. You know, we throw the beverage container away, every other province, it's worth 5 or 10 cents. And so there's always people picking up, collecting it. So he said, well what do you want to do? I said, I think we should run a campaign. He said, we don't have a budget for it. I said, I'll do it off the corner of my desk, honest. He goes, okay. I mean, John just said, okay. If you like, I've got all this stuff here I want done, says the President. And as long as that gets done, you do whatever else you want. Anyway. so I sent a letter to municipal governments and I attached to it a resolution that I asked the council to approve. And I'd done a bit of research and found that, you know, over half of what goes into landfills were beverage containers, beverage containers constituted half of the garbage we put into landfills. And of course, most of these little municipalities were running out of landfill space. And putting a landfill next to your house was not exactly the most popular thing locally. So they didn't have obvious alternatives or new places. And it was, it was a big deal and it was a bigger deal than I actually realized. So we sent the letter, and 86 municipalities passed a resolution and sent us a copy. And I asked them when you pass this, send it to the Minister of the Environment, who is John Cashore. So they all came in. So I knew how many John got because I got a copy and I called his office and said, we need beverage container legislation just like they have in Alberta and Nova Scotia and Ontario. And he goes, well why don't you come over and we'll talk about it? So we go over. He said, my lawyers are really busy. He said, I agree with you, but the lawyers are real busy. I could get it in the legislative thing, but we need a you know, we need to know what we're talking about. I said I'll draft the Bill. So I drafted it. But I didn't do that good a job because he immediately got a lawyer to go. And then they, you know, they did the lawyer work on it. And I took the Brewery Workers because the Brewery Workers said, well, we'll staff, volunteer staff, the recycling centre at the beginning until you get off the ground. So. John Cashore was great. John Cashore got all the industry leaders to come in and meet with them, explain what the legislation they were going to bring in, they brought in. You know, and now it's the Return It Corporation, Encore. And so the Bill passed and we got container legislation. And John just looked at me and I went. It was pretty easy. John didn't cost us a lot of money, you know, a bit of postage. But it's nice to have a government that actually believes in the environment. So, you know, that's sort of a small story of stuff that John let you do.

KN: [00:58:49] Okay. And John must have retired about '99 or thereabouts.

GS: [00:58:57] '99 yeah 2000.

KN: [00:58:58] And, George Heyman took over. How long were you at the GEU?

GS: [00:59:02] I retired in '04. Yeah. So I worked with George for four years. Yeah. And that was the second wave. You know, when George became President, the NDP government was defeated and the B.C. Liberals took over and Gordon Campbell just started slashing and burning and everything. It just felt like, you know, 1982 or 3 all over again. So that was we went through tough times again. But we kept organizing.

KN: [00:59:38] So when you when you retired in 2004, you became involved in the BC in the forming and running of the BC Labour Heritage Centre. Can you tell us why you thought that was important to do?

GS: [00:59:54] Well, um. Well, I just believed in history and stories. And if you don't tell the stories, they get lost. And I think younger, younger activists need to know that stuff just doesn't come on a platter. So I believed in history. I always liked history, but I believed that history should be, the stories of history should be told. And Jack Munro and Tom Kozar grabbed me by the arm and said, you're going to go on this Board. I went, okay.

KN: [01:00:27] So when you look back at your many years of service and activity in the union movement. What stands out for you that you feel you were part of helping to make happen? I mean, you've given us a couple of examples in your in your comments, both Tranquille and the beverage container legislation. Is there anything else that stands out that you might want to comment on in your whole time in the union movement?

GS: [01:00:57] Well, the beverage container legislation is one, but the the other one is helping to contribute to developing and organizing culture in the BCGEU. I mean, the BCGEU was not an organizing union in 1979 when I joined it, and in 2004, you couldn't run for office in that union and not believe in organizing because you just wouldn't get a vote. You know, workers believe that organizing, whether you're mobilizing for a social policy issue or an election campaign, those basic skills are important to any union and that you must use them. You know, I played a little bit of a part in that. There was many, many others that did. But, boy, it's the thing that stands out in my mind.

KN: [01:01:51] Okay. And I guess the last question I have, Gary, is one that you might reflect upon. And that's if you look at young people today who are getting involved and active in their unions... what advice might you have for them?

GS: [01:02:11] Um. But my advice would be to learn the system. Learn. Learn the system, how it works. When I was young, I was working on the House of Commons. I was assigned as a researcher. I was assigned to organize NDP caucus members against a Bill that would take Bell Canada out of the realm of regulation under the CRTC. And so I had to know much more about the rules than I knew. And so Cyril Symes said, go talk to Stanley Knowles. You know, he's the expert. So I went over to Mr. Knowles office, as we called him; staffers didn't call him Stanley. And he said, well, learn the rules and here they are. And so he walked me through the rules and he said, get the book out, start reading. You need to know the rules if you're going to be an effective agent of change. You got to know the rules. So I would say to young people, learn the rules so that you know how to change something, because status quo is not good enough, never is good enough. So you want to change stuff. You got to know how it works, where the little buttons are, where all the little cogs are. Learn the system and figure out from there, how to change it.