



Gloria O'Brien Oral History Interview, October 13, 2016

Title

“Fighting for Workers' Rights”

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Valley Library, Oregon State University.

Summary

In the interview, O'Brien discusses her upbringing in Kansas, her early interests in horticulture and social justice activism, and the circumstances that led to her move to Oregon. She then details her experiences of living on the Oregon Coast and in the Oregon Coast Range, and describes her initial employment at OSU as a Biological Science Technician in the Department of Greenhouse Operations. From there, she provides an overview of the department's operations, including the roles that student assistants play as well as the facilities in which OSU's greenhouse workers perform their daily tasks. She likewise notes her own specific work, with particular attention paid to her efforts in integrated pest management. She rounds out this section of the interview with reflections on her life as a part-time student in OSU's Horticulture program.

The remainder of the session is devoted to O'Brien's association with sub-local 083 of the statewide Service Employees International Union (SEIU). In commenting on her union activities, O'Brien shares her thoughts on the relationship shared between OSU administrators and union representatives since the early 2000s; memorable union actions in which she has participated; the roles played by union stewards on campus; and her own tenure as president of the sub-local. She likewise provides insight into the mechanics of contract bargaining, and also her own perspective on several hurdles that the union is attempting to overcome, including a reduction in the total number of classified employees working in Oregon as well as negative public perceptions of unionized workers. The interview concludes with thoughts on faculty and graduate student unionization at OSU, and O'Brien's sense of the future direction of SEIU and of OSU writ large.

Interviewee

Gloria O'Brien

Interviewer

Chris Petersen

Website

<http://scarc.library.oregonstate.edu/oh150/obrien/>

Transcript

Chris Petersen: Okay, today is July 27th, 2016 and we are with Gloria O'Brien, who works in the greenhouses here at OSU and has also been very actively involved with the union here on campus. And we'll talk a lot about both of those components of her life as well as some other stuff. I would like to begin by developing a little more of a biographical sketch and I'll ask you, to start with, where were you born?

Gloria O'Brien: I was born in Las Cruces, New Mexico. My father was going to the university there.

CP: And you were not raised, though, in New Mexico.

GOB: Nope. He got a job shortly after he graduated and got his doctorate at the University of Kansas and then worked there as a professor some twenty-odd years.

CP: What was his area?

GOB: Civil engineering. His specialty was waste-water sewage treatment.

CP: So you grew up in Lawrence then?

GOB: Mm-hmm. Lawrence is a city very similar to Corvallis in a lot of ways, except it's bigger.

CP: Can you tell me a bit more about community life in Lawrence for you growing up?

GOB: Like most university towns, I think, there are townies and then there are the people who are associated to the university. Having lived there in that town for so long, I felt like I belonged to both places. University of Kansas was - I went to school there and I was lucky enough that the high school had a program where you could also attend university classes at the same time, so I started taking university classes in my senior year of high school.

CP: What were you interested in growing up?

GOB: Back then I wanted to be an artist and I was lucky enough to go to a high school that had a program in romance languages, and I studied Latin at my high school and I also took Latin at the university at the same time. And so that was very fun for me. And I think that it helped inspire me later on wanting to go into horticulture, because it was handy knowing what some of the horticultural names actually meant.

CP: What do you think was the attraction to Latin, initially, for you?

GOB: Oh, lots of great stories. So it was fun to translate them.

CP: So school was something that you were interested in growing up in high school, before then? Was that something you thrived in, the school environment?

GOB: Yeah, I really liked going to school. Once I went into the university and I started studying classical antiquities and arts, then things didn't go quite as well because I started working at the city parks and I enjoyed being outside. So I stopped going to school.

CP: What type of artist did you aspire to be?

GOB: I really like printmaking. Intaglio printmaking is what I wanted to do.

CP: So did the gardening and the plants begin with this city parks job? Or was there something there before?

GOB: Oh, my grandmother used to live with us when we were growing up and so I would go outside and garden with her all the time. We always had vegetable gardens and flowers and lots of strawberries.

CP: So it was there from an early age then?

GOB: Yeah.

CP: But this job that you had for the city parks kind of took over for school at some point, it sounds like.

GOB: It did. I just enjoyed being outside and working in a park environment. You meet lots of people all the time and it was fun talking to people about plants and interacting with people.

CP: At this point, were you starting to think that you might gravitate towards a horticultural career?

GOB: I did. I think that was one of my problems of growing up in Lawrence, Kansas, the rivalries between the Ag college and the academic university in a state. And growing up in Lawrence, I never could imagine myself living in Manhattan, Kansas and going to school there, so I didn't.

CP: You met your husband in Kansas?

GOB: Yeah, he grew up in Wichita, Kansas and he was in Lawrence and I met him there.

CP: During your college days roughly? Or during the garden job days?

[0:05:02]

GOB: No, so back when I graduated from high school was, the Vietnam War had ended but they were still having a draft. At that time, I felt like having a draft to service a war was very wrong and so I joined a group called Kansans Against the Draft and I met my husband there. I was always sitting way in the back because I was kind of shy and he was a really smart person who always sat towards the front, so I noticed him right off.

CP: Social justice is a theme we talked about before, off camera. It was something important to you from an early age, I gather?

GOB: Yeah.

CP: Was there an inspiration for that? How did that arise in your personality?

GOB: Oh, even my mother was involved in social justice issues and did a lot stuff in Lawrence, was a Women's League of Voters there, and did stuff with the Democratic Party.

CP: So you met your husband and you eventually gravitated towards Oregon and there's a story there that has to do with SCUBA, is that correct?

GOB: There is. So my husband is a water person and was an avid SCUBA diver. There's not a lot of opportunities in Kansas to be a professional SCUBA diver. He actually dove in a nuclear power plant once to clear out a sewage blockage in a line and so I said "no, we can't do this." And so we decided to go where he could have a job as a SCUBA diver. And so we just loaded all our possessions in the back of a little truck that we made into a flat bed and came out to the West Coast.

CP: Was there a job waiting for you? Or did you get to the West Coast and then find a job?

GOB: Yeah, we just drove until - we had picked places that we thought would be likely spots and headed toward them. We hit northern California and Crescent City and then started driving up the coast until we found work.

CP: So I'm interested in knowing what the life of a professional SCUBA diver is like.

GOB: When we first got to South Beach, his very first job there was working for Undersea Gardens at their facility there, and so he did their shows. While he was there then, he was able to also do a lot of work on fishing boats that came in, because very often they get ropes fouled into their gears, and so they would come and hire people off the docks to go do that kind of work. And he really enjoyed working on ships a lot.

CP: So that was the main thrust of his SCUBA career then?

GOB: Yeah, working on ships. He went up to Washington once to harvest uni but unfortunately that was the year the emperor died and so there was no market for uni that year and he came home broke.

CP: So you settled in South Beach, which is just south of Newport.

GOB: Yeah, we lived in a little trailer actually under the bridge there. It was a very beautiful spot to live and it was only an eight-foot-wide trailer and it felt very much like being in a boat. It swayed so much in the wind and you could see the channel in front all time, got to watch the Coast Guard practicing, and it was a wonderful place to live. I had my two children there.

CP: Oh wow. So there was a family of four in a small trailer?

GOB: Yes. We spent a lot of time outdoors.

CP: Well, you started to work at some point as well, in South Beach. And this was in nurseries, is that correct? Private nurseries?

GOB: Yeah, I worked at a little nursery that had been called Kiss of the Sun and then it got sold and was Wisteria Nursery. But back in the day, it was fairly common to find these small nurseries that would propagate their own plant material and also sell retail. And I really enjoyed doing that a lot.

CP: What types of work did you do?

GOB: A lot of seed transplanting, taking cuttings, and waiting on our customers. And again, having the opportunity to talk to people about plants, which I really enjoyed doing.

CP: Did you start to build new skills, I assume, on the West Coast, as opposed to being in Kansas in a very different climate?

[0:10:05]

GOB: What beautiful plants there are here on the West Coast! And so I made a point of going out and learning how to identify plants out in the forest and would also, to supplement our income out there, we'd go out and dig up salal to sell to nurseries and things like that.

CP: And your children were raised in Newport?

GOB: Yeah.

CP: Can you tell me just a little bit more about, on a broader level, living on the Oregon coast? What it's like?

GOB: Well, it's always pretty windy, but you see the most rainbows that I've ever seen in my life, especially being at that location under the bridge. It's kind of fun in the Newport area because it's very busy during the summer and during winter when the universities are out, but then the rest of the year, it's a fairly quiet town. I enjoyed watching fishing vessels and even worked once shaking crab at a fish plant, which was kind of an awful job. But at the same time, I got to walk over the bridge every morning right as the sun was rising and listening to the sea lions.

CP: When did you move to Oregon?

GOB: We moved to Oregon – I'm really bad at remembering dates – it would have been in '86.

CP: Okay. So you began at OSU in 2008. So at some point there was a switch there.

GOB: Yeah. So eventually we moved to our property, which, I live out in the Coastal Range now, and my husband continued to work on the coast. And I got work here in the valley at various different nurseries and started to go to school at Linn-Benton Community College in their horticultural program. And I got a transfer degree there.

CP: So the shift was initially to, basically, to be living in a different space?

GOB: Yes.

CP: So you started here at OSU in 2008 though? That's what my notes say.

GOB: Mm-hmm.

CP: And that was in the Department of Greenhouse Operations?

GOB: Right. Now, I started attending classes here prior to 2008, but when I started working was in 2008.

CP: Okay. Let's talk a little bit more about your work and then we'll talk about your degree as well. Can you just give me a little bit of an overview of the work that you've done in the greenhouses?

GOB: Yes, so my title is technically a Biological Science Technician, level three, but I'm a Greenhouse Technician. And so we maintain an old greenhouse that's called the East Greenhouse that's part of the university, and then we also maintain an Extension greenhouse that's just part of the statewide Extension research program. And I do a lot of building maintenance and plumbing, but what I'm really there for, mostly, is to give people plant growing advice, and I'm the integrated pest management coordinator there.

CP: What does that mean?

GOB: So there's various ways to combat pests, either cultural controls, chemical controls, or biological controls. So that's considered integrated pest management. So what I really love doing is going and problem solving - how I can solve a pest problem with the least amount of resources?

CP: How big are these greenhouses?

GOB: Oh, so the west side is a pretty big facility, it's probably about two and a half acres over there. And the east greenhouses are a smaller facility, but there's lots and lots of little tiny greenhouses with lots and lots of different needs. Basically, we're growing every single commodity crop grown in Oregon.

CP: So are you responsible for all the greenhouses on campus?

GOB: There are other greenhouses. There's one at Richardson Hall, it's a Forestry greenhouse. And so, no, our charge is just those two facilities.

[0:15:06]

CP: There's one on the top of Weniger too, I think.

GOB: There is. I've never been up there but I've heard about that one.

CP: So I would imagine there's hundreds or maybe thousands of different types of plants in these spaces you're maintaining.

GOB: And that's been really fun for me because I've been exposed to just a wide variety of pests that are really fascinating to watch.

CP: Tell me a little bit more about the department. It's a small department.

GOB: Yeah, we have a very small department, just four full-time classified staff. My boss and the woman who runs the office, Judy, have been there for, both I think close to thirty years. And Sean, my colleague technician, and I have been there a much shorter time.

CP: And it's an arm of the College of Agricultural Sciences, is that correct?

GOB: It is, although we service several different departments: Botany, Crop and Soil Science, sometimes even the Food Sciences does work in the greenhouse too.

CP: And you work with students as well?

GOB: Mm-hmm. That's also very fun too.

CP: Can you tell me a bit more about that?

GOB: So we have a student crew that goes through and does a lot of our more general tasks like watering the plants every day. So I get to teach them how to water plants properly. And then I also work with the students that are a part of the projects and help give them plant growing advice, because very often they're told to do something but they have very little direction on how to get it done.

CP: And there are students that actually live at the greenhouses too, is that correct?

GOB: Yes, we have residents at both the east and the west facility. It's a great opportunity for them. Rent is fairly inexpensive and they get a lot of responsibility, but they get to be around the greenhouses all the time too. I think it would be fun to live in a greenhouse.

CP: I assume it's an apartment outside of the greenhouse; they don't actually live in the greenhouse, do they?

GOB: Right. They live, well there's one apartment upstairs at east, so that one, they have nice access to the Botany teaching greenhouse. And I heard actually once before I came they had a wild party where they actually brought in sand and made a beach scene in there to enjoy it all evening long.

CP: And what are their obligations in exchange for this cheap rent?

GOB: So they have to make sure everything is locked up properly at night. And then they take care of the facility during the weekend and monitor the environmental controls and make sure, if some emergent thing happens, that they either deal with it or call someone who can.

CP: Can you tell me a bit about the greenhouses as a place of work? I know there's pretty distinct differences between the university greenhouses and the Extension greenhouses.

GOB: Yeah, well the university greenhouses are built in the historical district, and it's a beautiful facility but it was built starting in 1927 and finalized when they ran out of money because of the Depression. And because it's in the historical district, it has very limited opportunity for doing any improvements and hasn't been reglazed since the 1970s because it's impossible to find that kind of materials anymore that could improve it up to its historical standards. So it's a little bit of a challenge, working on the east side, and we actually have plastic running on the interior portions of the greenhouse to prevent water from destroying people's experiments during the winter and also ensuring that if a piece of glass falls, it doesn't fall on somebody's head directly. But the west side, we were able to totally retrofit. I was a part of that process when I first started. I guess we finished the retrofit in 2010.

CP: So the Extension greenhouses were a similar situation when you arrived, but you could fix them up because they're outside of the historic district?

GOB: Right. And so we were able to remove all of the wooden sash bars and replace them with aluminum and then put in tempered glass in a lot of the areas. It made the panes bigger, so there's more light over there. And it's a safer facility to work in; doesn't rain inside.

[0:20:09]

CP: And the university greenhouses cannot be improved, essentially?

GOB: Essentially they can't, because there's no way the university would have enough money to sink into improving it to the historical standards that they would have to, because of that provision of being in the historic district. It would cost millions of dollars to do. And while it is a beautiful building, it doesn't really serve research purposes that much anymore, because the glass panes are small and it doesn't have as much light and it's harder to maintain the environment controls in it. So it's kind of unfortunate, I think, as a greenhouse; not so much as a building, but as a tool. I know I'm frustrated and my other colleagues get frustrated because we have that attitude towards that greenhouse. It's no longer as useful a tool as it could be.

CP: I wonder if there are plans to do anything about this that you know of?

GOB: Oh, no. And in fact, there's a little tiny greenhouse, a little shed-style greenhouse, that got built on the east side in the late sixties, probably was built in 1968. But because it was still considered in the historic district, it has taken three years for us to be able to get permission to have it removed, even though it really is not a part of the original historic structure. I don't see anything changing in our greenhouses until the big earthquake happens.

CP: [laughs] Well, I guess that'll be one positive outcome. Before we move on to a different chunk of topics, I would be interested in knowing if there are any particularly interesting projects that you reflect back on in the greenhouses that you've worked on? Or memorable moments?

GOB: So, as an integrated pest management coordinator, I'm, over the past several years especially, trying to introduce more biological controls in all the greenhouses. And that's been an interesting thing to do because I have to be able to work into people's projects and the protocols that they have. We've been doing a lot of work with the vegetable breeding program to try and improve their outcomes as well as reduce pests, because a lot of the pests detract from seed set and seed quality.

CP: What would be an example of a biological control?

GOB: Well, we use several different predatory mites that can either go out and control thrips or spider mites - especially the spider mite ones are very successful - which is really wonderful because, when I first started, we were only doing that in two greenhouses out of the whole place because it's not really a part of how we do funding. Our budget has a line for chemicals and it's never really had a line item for buying predators. So I had to kind of negotiate with the project to get cooperation to be able to do that.

CP: Well, you referenced taking classes at OSU at a time prior to actually working here. When did you start taking classes?

GOB: It was probably around 1998 that I started taking classes, just little bits at a time. At that time, I was working at Peoria Gardens and they had a very nice program that, if you're a full-time person there and you've been there for two years, then they will start paying for university classes for you.

CP: So you were coming to campus at that point, I'm guessing?

[0:25:02]

GOB: Mm-hmm.

CP: Did you take any online classes?

GOB: I didn't take any online classes then. I have since then; my last class actually was an online class in tractor maintenance.

CP: That seems like one you'd have to be there in person.

GOB: It does. I kind of wonder about that one myself.

CP: Can you tell me a bit about the experience of an online class for you?

GOB: Oh, well, I had a good instructor. I guess too because I'm kind of an older person, doing the online classes initially was really a challenge for me because the computer I have at my home wasn't good enough to initially run some of the programs that were being used here at OSU. I remember a writing class in particular that I took that wasn't an online class but where I had to write - it was a plant propagation class, but it was the writing intensive class - and he wanted us to write a certain amount of words, but have it in a certain tiny area. And it took me hours to do it on my computer, and I sent it here to OSU to the instructor and because of the different programs, it got totally messed up.

CP: How about the experience of being a non-traditional student and coming in part time? What was that like?

GOB: Well, it was fun taking Horticulture classes because it was inspiring to be around young people all the time. And I felt like I could be helpful, but I also felt like I didn't want to interject myself too much into the class either because I wasn't a professor and I didn't want to dominate what they were doing. Especially in small groups, it was really fun.

CP: Did you find that you were able to implement some of the stuff you were learning into your actual job as you were learning it?

GOB: I did, actually. So I learned about pasteurization as a process for reducing pathogens. It used to be done, historically, in the fifties, quite a bit - thirties to fifties - because then they didn't use media, pre-made media, they used soils. And so once I learned more about that then, I took that information back to my work at Peoria and we started steam pasteurizing containers so that rather than having high school kids spend hours and hours washing these containers that we used in bleach, we could just pasteurize them. It was actually a much more effective way of controlling root diseases.

CP: Were there any professors that really made an impact?

GOB: Oh, yeah, I liked Rich Regan a lot, he's just retired. A lot of the Horticulture instructors have retired recently. Jack Stang was a really good instructor as well.

CP: Well, you mentioned starting in 1998 and my notes say that you finished in 2015.

GOB: Yeah.

CP: That must have been really satisfying, after seventeen years of work.

GOB: Yep. My family was very, very proud of me that I finally finished.

CP: You referenced also living in the Coast Range. You live in the community of Burnt Woods now, is that correct?

GOB: Yeah, except I don't really live in the community because it's so rural out there. I live in the shadow of Cougar Mountain on Shot Pouch Road.

CP: Can you tell me more about living in the Coast Range?

GOB: Oh, it's so beautiful. I enjoy driving home all the time because it's so hot here in the valley and as soon as I turn off the highway to head towards my house it's like I turned on the air conditioner all of a sudden. The air is cooler and it smells nice. And driving to work in the morning is incredibly beautiful because I come down from the mountains down into the valley and I often go through various layers of clouds on my way down.

CP: What are the winters like?

[0:30:00]

GOB: It can be a little cold there sometimes, and it snows.

CP: Is there much of a community feeling in Burnt Woods?

GOB: There was for us more when my children were going to school, because they were, for a while, attending Eddyville School out there.

CP: Less so now?

GOB: Well, I don't have as much opportunity to meet people as I did. My son and daughter-in-law have moved back out there again, they've moved into her parents' house, so now I can go down and visit my son and all his friends. He has more local connections any more than I do.

CP: Let's talk about the union. In our pre-interview, we talked a little bit about - I referenced this interest in social justice issues and that manifested for you in one way through your interest in the United Farm Workers, is that correct?

GOB: Yeah. I was always inspired by the United Farm Workers and read a lot about the boycotts of grapes back in the seventies and so forth. As a person who worked at nurseries, I was always kind of interested in joining the farm workers' union but just never had the opportunity; didn't work at a unionized facility. So this was my first time to work at a place where a union was at. Respect is very important to me and I think that unions are a great vehicle for giving workers respect.

CP: And your husband was also involved in union activity prior to you, is that correct?

GOB: Yes. So after being a SCUBA diver - once he messed his back up from carrying tanks all the time - he started working, initially at an ambulance company. And then he worked for the hospital as an emergency medical technician there. He was the shop steward at the hospital there in Newport for about twenty years, and he really encouraged me to become active in the university here when I first started.

CP: So you got the job in 2008 and you became involved in the union around the same time?

GOB: That was a contract negotiating year and so there were actions happening on campus. I was at every one of them. We wanted to get a good contract, so I was trying to do my part to support getting a good contract by just participating. Then I started going to leadership meetings and wanted to be involved. It's good to have as many people as possible involved with the union.

CP: And again in our pre-interview conversation, you mentioned some details about what I've labeled "the pre-history of union relations," at least prior to your involvement. Can you talk a little bit about the legacy that you were walking into at that point in terms of relationships between the administration and the union?

GOB: Yeah. President Risser, who was the president prior to Dr. Ray, had a very negative attitude towards unions and made it very difficult on campus to be part of a union. That's been changing over time. Dr. Ray has been a lot more willing to talk to the union and recognize the union and, as much as he can, allow us to participate in some of the decisions that end up happening. Like the last human resources director, I was directed to be on that hiring committee because I was part of the union.

CP: Do you have any details on the difficult period with Risser and how it became negative? Do you know much more about what was happening?

GOB: Well, that was before my time, but he didn't want to have a union here at all and didn't allow access to people at the worksites and so forth, so it was hard for organizers or activists to even talk to people about the union and that makes people fearful to be approached. The library has kind of a little bit of a history in that, actually, it was only recently when - we've been talking about we hadn't been allowed up past the fourth floor to organize and that has now changed. So we have full access to the library now.

[0:35:29]

CP: What does that mean, lack of full access?

GOB: Well, so of course a union organizer or activist needs to be able to talk to workers, and it's hard to talk to people when they're off work because they get off work, they go home. Everybody's busy, we have busy lives now. And so it's important to be able to talk to people where they work and obviously you don't want to interrupt people's work, so you try to schedule talking to people during break times or lunch times. But there are some supervisors and some locations where even that sort of access was not allowed.

CP: That's interesting. Let's backtrack to 2008. I'm interested, you said there were multiple actions happening in the contract year. What is an action?

GOB: Well, rallies or marching with signs, going up to the fourth floor there at the administration building and trying to talk to whoever's up there, and things like that. Making noise and being heard.

CP: And then you took a next step and you actually joined the bargaining team?

GOB: Well, so I was a steward for a while, which is a person who assists other co-workers who are having difficulties where they're working. And then I also became the president of the local for a couple of years and then I became the bargaining team person.

CP: Okay, so then you were not on the team in 2008?

GOB: No.

CP: Okay, my notes are wrong about that. What was the year of the bargaining for you, just so I have this correct?

GOB: Just this last contract actually.

CP: Okay.

GOB: So initially, the person who was the bargaining delegate was Donna Stevenson. But what we do is elect several persons to be bargaining delegates and it kind of goes down the line, whoever has the next amount of votes then serves. And she unfortunately had a heart attack, and so I became the bargaining delegate. They'd already been bargaining for about three months before I started.

CP: Okay. We will track back to that one in a second. You mentioned becoming a union steward. Can you tell more about how that came about?

GOB: Again, the influence from my husband. And it's a really important thing to do. A lot of people don't know that their contract is easily available online at the 503 website and so they just don't realize what some of the rights that they really have are. And then there are also people who are in situations where there's personality conflicts going on and we can go in and help, hopefully, to ameliorate that sort of situation too.

CP: And there's a training component to becoming a steward?

GOB: Yeah. So anybody who's in SEIU 503, which encompasses a lot of different sort of jobs, state jobs as well as the university jobs, we do our training together, kind of generally on what the goals of being a good steward are. And then after that, more specifically on what the university is.

CP: As a steward, are you waiting for people to come to you or are you trying to go out to them?

GOB: So, lots of the time, it's people coming to you. But once people know that you're a steward, chances are if they see you, they'll be coming up to talk to you and asking about a situation.

CP: What were the more common types of problems that people were talking about?

[0:40:01]

GOB: Well, bully bosses, unfortunately. And so then we work within Human Resources to try to resolve issues if we can and bring it to their attention that sometimes supervisors are acting inappropriately. And then there are other things, like parking on campus. Initially when there was, the parking areas were portioned out and people started having to pay for their parking passes, it made it so people who worked in Housing and Dining at night, especially, had a really hard time. They couldn't afford to buy parking passes close to the places they worked and it was an unsafe situation in a lot of cases for, especially women who worked in the dining halls. And we were able to make it so that - then, they wanted to have the parking go all night long, where you had pay - so if it was after five, you don't have to pay. And so those people were able to park closer to where they worked. And even, we were able to flex time on that specifically for those persons if their shifts started before five o'clock or ended after eight in the morning.

CP: It sounds like this is a pretty big obligation to be a union steward, in terms of time and energy. I'm guessing it was a lot of evenings and weekends involved here?

GOB: It is, because other than the actual meetings that you have with Human Resources, all of it is volunteer time off the clock.

CP: On the topic of actions, as I guess they're referred to, are there any specific rallies that stand out from the time that you've been here as being more memorable than others? Or other actions?

GOB: Oh yeah, a couple. One of the ones that I thought was the most fun but it was a little controversial was one of the times we went up into Kerr Administration. People had drums and whistles and kazoos and we had a couple really good trumpet players; we went walking up the staircase and it sounded like the Battle of Mordor just walking through the building, and the whole building shook when we walked in so that we were heard. And then another one that was really fun was walking into Kerr Administration again, but down on the first floor, and we gently sang the song "Which Side Are You On?" and then had a moment of silence after that. That was really very powerful; I think people got goosebumps when we did that one. And then we had really beautiful chalk art once in front of the MU building.

CP: So you decided to run for president of the sub-local, is that correct, in 2010?

GOB: Yeah.

CP: Why did you decide to do this?

GOB: Because nobody else wanted to do it. [laughs] No, I feel strongly that new personalities should always become a part of the union so it's not just dominated by one or two personalities, and I wanted to interject some new blood into it.

CP: Was there a campaign?

GOB: Well, kind of. It's hard to campaign as such. I didn't have money to campaign; I didn't buy advertisements or anything. I made some flyers and put them up on bulletin boards and wrote some pieces that I tried to get around so that people could hear what my thoughts were on things.

CP: Can you talk about those thoughts? What was your platform?

GOB: Well, I don't know that I really had a platform as such, except that I wanted to have more engagement. And I think when you just get new people involved in leadership, that itself makes it easier for other persons who say, "oh the union doesn't do anything for me" to say "well maybe it's something to be involved in."

[0:45:20]

CP: Were you able to achieve that, you think?

GOB: I think so. I think there are a bunch of newer people who have been becoming a part of the leadership. And that's a very good thing.

CP: So what were some of the activities or the obligations that you assumed as president? You did it for four years.

GOB: Well, first you run the monthly classified workers meeting that we have, just as a chair, but also try to organize throughout the year what various activities that are going to happen. I tried to, again, get more involvement by doing other community activities as well, so we now routinely support Food Share every fall and early in the spring by doing volunteer work with Food Share. And a Christmas program where we tried to get presents donated for children who might not otherwise have presents, and those kinds of things. I also was involved in the very initial annual May Day celebration that happens at Central Park and is run by a coalition of groups.

CP: That's interesting. The monthly classified meetings, what happens at those?

GOB: Well, they're a place, for one, for us to give updates about what's happening in state politics or just in the union in general or in the local. But also it's a place for people who can come and air issues that they have. That's where we often find out about "oh this is happening in my unit and is there something that can be done about this kind of situation?"

CP: Was part of this position also trying to cultivate new people to be stewards? Just thinking about the amount of work that's involved, I wonder if it's difficult to maintain the full quorum of stewards?

GOB: It's very difficult to maintain stewards. It's pretty easy to get burnt out on doing steward work, so we're always looking for people who want to do that. It's a nice opportunity to help people out.

CP: Well, let's trace back now to the bargaining and, I guess this was 2014, is that correct?

GOB: Mm-hmm.

CP: So you were on the bargaining team. I'm very interested in knowing more about, I guess on an abstract level first of all, how contract negotiations work and then to learn more about your specific experience in contract negotiation.

GOB: Well, it is very much negotiating. So you have to make offers and deal things and it's a balance. One side or the other is not going to win; everybody has to make trades and accommodations. We go in every time trying to improve the contract in various ways. We send out a survey prior to negotiating for the contract to ask our members what issues they think are the most important to work on, and then we really try to push hard on those issues.

Right now, I'd say one of the issues that people wanted was more flexibility in time, so that they - a lot of people now are using bus services to get here and we've been able to get a little more flexibility on people's arrival times and so forth. And then being replaced by temporary workers in units is a problem and it continues to be a problem, but in this contract we worked on that. I guess the contract previous to this one, we made it so that temporary workers who worked for the university itself were able to - they're not exactly covered by the contract, because they're not members, but all the provisions of the contract apply to them and their work standards. And now in this last one, we were able to get them health insurance benefits.

And so that makes it, one, better for those persons who are working as temporary workers, but it also is helpful in that now the university has to really look at the cost-benefit ratio of having temp workers. Why not just hire a dedicated classified worker that will be there all the time? Classified workers are very important here at the university because we're part of the historical integrity of the university because we've been here so long and we kind of know the processes and we can teach them to new faculty coming in.

[0:51:27]

CP: So, specific to 2014, how did those negotiations go?

GOB: Well, we've been getting small raises these last several contracts. When I first started here in 2008, those were the times when we were getting furloughs, and so it's been nice, finally starting to get somewhat of a raise. We're also, we get step increases up to a certain point in our service. In past contracts, they've delayed steps for a long time and now they're not delayed quite as long. So there's little advantages that way, financially.

CP: Were you actually at the table during negotiations in 2014? I'm interested in knowing what that's like.

GOB: Yeah. Unfortunately a lot of it is, you come up with your proposals, you submit your proposals to the other side, they say thanks, and then they leave. And then you sit there and you wait for a couple hours until they come back in again. Then you discuss what they've come up with from your proposal and then that's the negotiation part of it.

CP: And once you received the counter proposal, you go back to the membership and talk about it? Is that how it works?

GOB: Yeah, it is. I mean, for that particular time at the table, very often we'll do it in a couple days so we're staying in those rooms all that time. But every university, when we go there, there'll be a rally that goes on outside during the bargaining. And while we can't talk about the specifics a lot in a contract, because you want to be able to talk in good faith with the person that you're negotiating with, we're able to talk in general terms about what is happening and motivate them to participate in actions a lot that way.

CP: So, as the bargaining team, do you go into negotiation with a clear understanding of a line in the sand that you're not going to cross? I'm trying to gauge how you actually negotiate; how you figure out what is and isn't acceptable in the moment.

GOB: Well, so the last two contracts, they've been trying to take away several things - provisions in overtime, insurance. So for instance, insurance benefits. Several contracts ago, we had full insurance paid and we tried to have a line in the sand. But there's, you have to be able to move somewhat. But you can come to a point that it's not going to move any further than that, and so that's what we were able to do. Even this last contract, they tried to take even more of the insurance benefits away and we weren't going to move on that one at all.

[0:55:22]

CP: Has a strike been imminent in the time that you've been here?

GOB: Oh yeah, I think so.

CP: And how does that process work? Is it just a matter of voting? Or how did the union decide that it was going on strike?

GOB: So, once it seems like negotiations aren't going any further, then you go into what is called a cooling off period, where both entities are probably trying to figure out where they can switch their lines in the sands. And then, after that cooling off period, you go out to the membership, you say "this is what their last offer is, are you going to accept it?" and then there's a vote. That's when it can be close to having a strike or not. And it was pretty close this last time to being a strike.

CP: Let's talk a little bit more about specific issues that are faced by the union and classified employees. And again, in our pre-interview, one of the things you mentioned was just the numbers of classified staff have been decreasing over time. You mentioned the temporary workers, but can you talk a little more about the squeeze on numbers?

GOB: Well, it's just kind of natural that our numbers have diminished over the years because technology use has increased, so there's not as much need for typists and other sorts of jobs that technology has taken over. So that's reduced our numbers. But now we're coming into a time period where the universities have become more independent of each other with the creation of governing boards, and there's a real big push again in this last contract on them wanting to have us accept negotiating at our universities directly with the local that's at the university. And that was one thing that we stopped in this last contract, but there's going to be a really big push in this next contract to try to attack that again. And it really diminishes that power of what you can do when you have fewer people. I guess, kind of the way unions are, the more people the better.

CP: And you mentioned that the higher ed unit is already negotiating separately from other entities within the SEIU statewide, is that correct?

GOB: Yeah. So, when I very first started in 2008, we negotiated still with the statewide workers for economic issues, but not contract line issues. And so we had the same insurance benefits and sort of overtime rules and things like that; more financial issues. And then the state actually wanted to make it so the universities would become separate, so that ended

up happening at the state legislature, where they made it so that our universities were no longer state agencies. So that diminished our power for bargaining on economics, because we weren't bargaining with the rest of the state workers. It's like going from a power of - I'm trying to be realistic - a power of 30,000 people to a power of 3,000 people. So definitely not as strong. And now they're wanting to divide us even further.

CP: Meaning that all the different universities would negotiate separately?

GOB: Right.

CP: On the topic of solidarity, I'm interested in knowing how easy or difficult it is to maintain that with other places like, for example, Eastern Oregon University or Southern Oregon University? It's a very different situation than OSU.

[1:00:13]

GOB: Yes, but we all have the same jobs, we're serving the same mission, we're being a part of the higher education process for Oregonians. And I think that a lot of us find that a very important mission, really. Lots of us work at the university because we want to be involved with students and young people that are learning things and it makes it exciting. So a person who is an office worker here has the same sorts of responsibilities as a person in eastern Oregon who's an office worker. Not a whole lot of greenhouse technicians, I'm afraid, but a whole lot of the jobs are repeated across the universities.

CP: Can you talk a bit about the public perception of unions? It's often that the perception of state employees or public employees is fairly negative, in this state anyway.

GOB: It is. I think that the public has gotten a negative viewpoint of unions because of the media perceptions, and probably a lot of that came about in the 1970s. A lot of the journalists were parts of unions, the newspapers all had unions. Those got squashed in the '70s and after that, the media was free to be able to start the perception that unions are bad; bad for business. It's common for people to think that union workers are lazy or greedy, but I don't find that the case. I think that workers everywhere want to do a good job and be respected, and that's what a union is about. We want to be rewarded too, in a way that supports our good work. I don't see very many thugs involved in our unions. I see, really, a lot of nice people.

CP: Central to a lot of this, I think, is PERS.

GOB: It is, yeah. And it's unfortunate that other people don't have retirements. I think that it's the misdirection that there are businesses who don't want to give their workers retirement benefits anymore, and so now people who still have retirement benefits are viewed as users of the system. And that's not the case. The people that are the users of the system are huge corporations that make lots of money but don't honor their workers by giving them retirement benefits so that they can live out their golden years after working for years and years at a business.

CP: My understanding too is that there was an agreement made a while ago, a long while ago. Is that the six percent pick up agreement? Am I correct about that?

GOB: Yeah. So that was initially negotiated during a Republican administration, it was a Republican governor. And it was again, we're bargaining as a statewide unit and he recognized that actually he could save money by offering, instead of raises that year, what is now called the six percent pick up. And so it made a lot of fiscal sense. You didn't take it home in your paycheck then, it got stuck in our retirement, but it was something we won a long time ago by trading things off. People talk about it as something that is undeserved; it's just not right. We lost raises those years and we got retirement instead. And that was our choice.

CP: Graduate students have made inroads at OSU with unionizing. I'm sure you've observed that and perhaps been a part of it.

GOB: Yes, they're very good.

CP: Can you talk about that?

[1:05:01]

GOB: That's always exciting to be a part of their meetings. They have a pretty powerful group. So, they've actually been able to get health insurance recently whereas that was something that was unheard of before. I think people too forget that another part of the unions in higher education that are really important is that those people are looking out for our students too. Class sizes, who's going to be teaching the classes. These are issues that the graduate students especially are very important voices.

CP: And there are faculty unions elsewhere in Oregon, but not here?

GOB: That's right. But hopefully someday it'll happen here as well. University of Oregon has a union, Western has a faculty union, and PSU also does. So we're the last of the large universities to not have a faculty union and I think that they've proven themselves to be effective at other places.

CP: Do you have any theories on why that's the case at OSU? Why there is no faculty union?

GOB: My theory is that because we have so much research money and grant money coming in here, probably more so than those other institutions, and it's hard to divvy up that kind of money. And that also causes, I think, a lot of competition. It's not natural for researchers who are now obligated to go out and find their research money as well as do their research to want to assist the person who works in the Philosophy department or the Sociology department, because they have their own mission and that's their research. So I think that's one thing that makes it harder for them to find that unity amongst themselves to organize.

CP: Are there folks within the union who have made an impact on you, personally or professionally? I know that in our previous conversation, you mentioned a woman who worked in food service, her story was powerful.

GOB: Lynn Thompson was a school teacher for many years, came here and started working as a food service worker so that she could have health insurance for her family and some assistance putting her girls through college too, because she has a small family farm. When she was a teacher, she was a math teacher and she's just extremely intelligent, very good at critical thinking. And I, who tend to be maybe a little emotional sometimes about issues, she toned me down and we had really great conversations. And there's a woman, Deb Carroll, who works here in the library, who has been really wonderful to watch over the years. She's a passionate person and really believes in respect as well and has volunteered many, many years to do steward work, to work as an officer. She loves to come to the rallies in her funny looking hat and her beads and she's not ashamed of it.

CP: Well, a couple of concluding questions for you here. My first is just your sense of where the union is at right now and where it might be heading. Do you feel like it's as strong as it's always been?

GOB: Just in that nation in general, unions are in a really vulnerable spot, and so I think we always feel like we're under attack. Public sector unions are kind of getting towards the last of it because there's not as many. The Teamsters are really small. There's not that many unions out there anymore because they've been crushed by the corporate world. But there are victories that are happening right now and unions are a part of them. We've been a part of the fifteen-dollar minimum wage movement, and that doesn't require membership to be a part of. It's something unions are going out and trying to improve working conditions for people in general so, one, it takes the target off of our backs. But it also, I hope, makes it more easy for people to visualize what we're really about, and that is to improve the lives of working people in the United States.

[1:10:50]

CP: And how about the university? Where do you think the university is right now? How is it positioned as it looks towards its 150th birthday a couple of years from now?

GOB: Oh, well, universities are also in a challenging place because of state funding going to it and the many different roles now that the universities are playing over and above just educating people. So that's very much a challenge - and to be able to afford it all. I enjoy working here at OSU. I also value working at a Land Grant institution. I kind of think that

might be part of the mission that they're not focusing on as much as they have been in the past, because they have so many other directions that they're being pushed.

CP: Well, Gloria, I want to thank you for this. You worked all day and then you came here on your free time and shared your thoughts for our project and I really appreciate that.

GOB: Oh, well I hope it's of value to you.

CP: Yes, thank you.

[1:12:11]