

Grace Thostenson

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Interviewer: Karen Werlin

Q: Where were you born and where did you grow up?

GT: I was born in Mundare, Alberta. Shortly before I started school we moved into Vegreville, Alberta, where I spent my life until I moved to Calgary to start working for the union.

Q: What was your family background?

GT: My father was an upholsterer. So he was self-employed, and my mother stayed at home. I had six siblings; so she was taking care of the family. We were quite poor. For several years we were actually on welfare, which was a tough life to live in the neighbourhood.

Q: What sort of education did you receive?

GT: We went to actually a separate school, a Catholic school. We weren't Catholic but it was the closest school to our house; so that's where we went. Then I went into a public school in high school. Really the only after high school education I've had is as an adult going to various trainings and courses through universities and certificates.

Q: Who were your role models and mentors?

GT: Well I think probably the foundation for my beliefs and my values was my mother. She was always fair and a kind person. Into the work world there were a number of people I looked up to in the union movement, and it was all based on fair and doing the right thing. So those were the types of people. Dale Ashton had been business manager at the IBEW at that point and certainly I looked up to him when I got involved with things.

Q: What was your first job when you left home?

GT: Well the first fulltime job I had was as a long distance operator with AGT. I started there; I was only in there for a short period of time. I was 17 years old when I started there, and I was there for just a few months and then I went into another job with AGT. I stayed with AGT for about 13 years; so I was in several jobs in there. Started as the operator, then I went into an administrative support job, moved on into an engineering support area, a drafting area, then into a warehouse position, then into a customer service position. Then that was when the union asked if I'd be interested in going to work for them for a bit. So I went on leave to the union and that turned into a fulltime job and here I am.

Q: And that was with IBEW?

GT: It was with IBEW Local 48. That was the local that had telecommunications. They were around until the merger became BC Tel and TELUS, which AGT became TELUS.

Q: How did you end up with the United Utility Workers?

GT: After the merger between BC Tel and TELUS, there were two unions. The vote came down. IBEW lost the vote. At that point I was looking for work and the Utility Workers were looking for someone to work with them. So I started working with them. Even though it's different industries there's a lot of parallels between telecommunications and the electrical industry, the deregulations and things that went through. So a lot of similarities. Certainly the background that I had while working at AGT in all the different departments, there was a lot of similarities with the work that my members do.

Q: Can you give us a bit more information about your job with the United Utility Workers?

GT: I started there as the labour relations administrator and within about a year they went through some restructuring. The individual that had been business manager--it was an elected position at the time--it was Landon Milan; he had hired me. At that point his employer said, you have to come back to work or stay with the union fulltime. He went back to his job as a substation tech with the employer. So the UUWA restructured and made it a hired position and asked me to stay on as the business manager. So I've been doing that since I joined them in 2000. So I've been doing it since then; 2001 is when I took over as business manager.

Q: Were you the first hired business manager?

GT: Yes I was.

Q: What are the working conditions like at the Utility Workers? Are you working in the office typically or do you go out to jobsites?

GT: I'd like to say I'm mostly in the office but I'm doing a lot of travelling right now. But it is just still a lot of office work. I'm not out in the ditches with the guys mostly, but I'm out in the field offices at the employers and meeting with members and management and dealing with day to day issues.

Q: Do you want to expand on any of that?

GT: Our members range from support people through to technicians to linemen. Certainly I think the bulk, the biggest group would be the linemen, but it's fairly split, but that would be the biggest concentration. So we have a lot of field workers and a lot of office workers, but the biggest concentration of one type would be linemen. So it is unusual I think for a woman to be in this position, but I haven't found that to be an issue. I think it's almost a benefit. I throughout my career with the union have found that I was respected, I was given credit for the work I did, for the representation I give to the members. Certainly I've run across the inappropriate behaviors years ago at an IBEW

event where there was somebody actually physically trying to lay hands on me. So I did experience those types of things, but I would say overall I have not had a lot of problems.

Q: So you don't feel there have been a lot of barriers or challenges to you as a woman doing the job that you do?

GT: Not that I haven't. If you stick with it and you can prove that you can do the job, at least in my experience--and I certainly know that's not the case everywhere--, but in my experience I've had the good fortune that I could overcome any of those issues and stereotypes, and people respect that.

Q: Have there been other women in the Utility Workers in a position similar to you?

GT: They'd had somebody before but it was more she was hired as a lawyer, and this would've been probably a couple of decades ago and it was more of just an advisory type position. We do have a few women on our Board of Directors right now. So we do have women involved; it isn't that I'm the only one around. Previously one of my assistants was a woman; she's since retired. That was Peg Askin. So she's been very involved in labour as well.

Q: Is the majority of the workforce men?

GT: It would probably be almost evenly split. The interesting thing is we only have one female linesperson, line technician, power line technician. But yes, it's kind of an even split.

Q: The female line technician, how does she fit in as far as having any challenges, being the sole female? Are you aware of any concerns?

GT: No, thankfully I haven't. I've talked to her briefly and she said things were fine. I think she's still off on maternity leave right now. She was receptive to it. There had been

another woman in the line trade that I didn't get a chance to meet. She left after a very short period of time and she just said that the company she was working for did things manually, where she said when she was working for other companies there was a lot of technology that they used to eliminate a lot of that manual labour. She just said she wasn't capable of doing it in the manner they did it. I think that sends a message that we need our employers to do a little bit more to get women into the trade.

Q: In your first job with AGT, were you aware that it was a unionized position, and did that have any bearing on you applying for a job there?

GT: I don't think it had a bearing. I think, I mean it was a small town; so AGT was a decent employer to go to. But my oldest sister and brother had also worked for them. It's kind of an interesting story I think. My brother, when I was young, I was probably about nine or so and he was working for AGT. He was a member of the IBEW so he would get their magazine. I didn't really know what a union was. I just knew that he got this magazine and it was full of pictures and stories about all these members doing things. It almost seemed like it was some kind of a secret society. So it had some intrigue to me. So it was kind of interesting that after I grew up and got out to work I wound up working at the same place and then becoming part of the same union and working for it. When I started as an operator, I was 17. I didn't really know much more than the secret society bit about unions. I was told that there was a union in there and that I could sign a card if I wanted to, and unfortunately that was about it. I don't think I did sign the card the first few months I was there. Then the next job I went into was non-union at the time. That union hadn't been organized, and it was in the early '80s that they tried again to organize it. I helped with that. We met with a lot of 'unions are outdated. It was good when kids were in the coalmines; we don't need them now.' Unfortunately a lot of people believed that. So the first attempt we weren't successful; we lost on the vote. But a couple of years later we went back after it and we got the vote. That was at a time when wage increases, there were two bargaining units, one for the operators and one for all the plant and field people. They were getting increases in the double digits. When it came to the clerical group, that was the non-union group, we were getting less. When we had issues, the

company had established an employee council and we were encouraged to take our issues to the council. I did actually have an issue. I had booked vacation one summer and then just shortly before the vacation my manager called me in to tell me that if the other people in the office didn't work overtime then they'd probably have to cancel my vacation. He thanked me for working the overtime but he said, but you know, you need your coworkers to do that. I was seen as the leader in the group. So, when he gave me that threat, I went out and called a meeting with my coworkers and said, he's gonna cancel my vacation if you don't work overtime. So I think none of us should work overtime. When I went back to him and said, ya we've all decided we're not going to work overtime, I said, and cancel my vacation if you want but I have plane tickets. That was his out. He said, oh I didn't know you had plane tickets; we won't cancel it on you. But that was the start of it. That's what led me to go to the employee council and say, so what can you do about it? They said, really we can't do anything. We get to sit in a room with management every once in a while and tell them what our problems are and what our concerns are and how much money we'd like for wage increases, but at the end of it all it's whatever they wanna do. So, at that point, it was like ya, we need to get organized. So we did and then I wound up being the first shop steward in the group and went on to be the unit secretary and then the unit chairperson. Then I was asked by Maxine Boyd, she had been negotiating for the operators and then she came in and said, do you wanna do the negotiations for the clerical? Actually it wound up being it was gonna be joint. So it was an election between Maxine and I, and I was successful and went into my first round of negotiations. I liked it and they thought I did well in there, and it was shortly after that that they asked me to go on secondment to the union.

Q: So you've held a number of positions within IBEW.

GT: Yes. I was the unit recorder locally and the unit chair, then the negotiator. Then I went on, I was seconded and I went in as a business representative, then became an assistant business manager. That was a position I held until the IBEW lost its certificate.

Q: What position do you currently hold with the United Utility Workers?

GT: Business manager.

Q: Can you tell us about any important work that you've carried out or that your union has carried out?

GT: I guess that's tough for me because I just think that it's the right thing to do. I think it's all important. I can think of obviously, well you've saved somebody's job, you did all these things. But it's all important and I don't know that I would jump up and say, hey look, this is something great that I did. I think the association, the unions I've been involved with, the work has been great. I don't know that there's specific projects that I would say, hey that's really terrific. We've certainly worked hard to do well for our members and for people within our industry. We've been leading the way. We're a small group, we're about 1,700 members, yet we've been doing quite well in our industry and helping out with all the working conditions.

Q: Are you currently involved in any campaigns with your union local?

GT: Not really. There's 1,700 members. We're a staff of two and a half representatives. We were originally from Athabasca down to the US border between Alberta-BC border. So it was a big area. We now have Yellowknife added to that, and Grande Cache just recently joined us as well. So I'm spending a lot of time just trying to service the membership as opposed to getting into any specific campaigns. But as a small organization, the board and staff and myself try to support the different things that are carried on.

Q: What specific events have you been involved in from a women's perspective?

GT: No, and I think that's probably because I've been lucky that I've just fit in. I don't know if that's more my attitude. Like I said, I've had some situations but generally maybe it's just my ignorance or unwillingness to deal with anything that might be said or done,

but I just go about it. I think if people bring it up as an issue that you're a woman, what do you know, I just move on beyond that. I can't say that I've had it and I feel bad that it sounds like I've had a real easy time. I don't know if I have or if I've just dealt with it and it seemed easy.

Q: Have you received any awards or honours as a woman on behalf of the union or the labour movement?

GT: No I don't think I have anything specific as being a woman. No I can't think of anything.

Q: Outside of your union life, what other activities are you involved in?

GT: Right now not a lot cuz there isn't' much outside my union life except sleep. But actually I sit on the Workers Compensation Board of Directors right now, so I've taken that on. I just finished up a 12 year term with the Alberta Labour Relations Board. So those are still in conjunction with work. If you're interested in outside of work, I try to get back to see family. Most of my family is still up around the Vegreville area. My partner's family is out in Kelowna; so I try to get out to Kelowna once a year at least and certainly back to Vegreville every couple of months and spend time with family. I like golfing and I like to go to the golf tournaments and win the ladies' longest drive. Maybe that's why I don't have a problem with men.

Q: Have you had any family responsibilities that have made your union activities particularly challenging?

GT: No, I'm single. Well no, I'm not single. I'm not married in a traditional marriage. I'm a lesbian. I have a partner; we have no children. Without her support though, I don't know that I could do the job to the extent that I'm doing it. It's nice to have somebody say, do what you have to do. Today we're looking at trying to plan some bargaining up in Yellowknife. One of the dates that came in is right around the time we're planning to do

something for her 50th birthday. It was like, well how do I book bargaining? The message I got back was, do what you have to do. It's that kind of support and that's what I'm saying. I feel lucky and privileged, but it's the people around and the attitude.

Q: You're in a very supportive environment.

GT: Absolutely, ya.

Q: Is there anything else you'd like to add?

GT: I don't think there is. Like I said, I feel privileged that I've been able to be accepted in places. I know lots of women don't get that. I deal with women that deal with lots of problems in the workplaces that just amazes me that that still goes on. But personally I've dealt with the ones that were horrific.

Q: What's your opinion of where you're at with women in your field – are we closing the gap?

GT: I almost think that it's been kind of stagnant and maybe even sliding back a bit. I know that when I got involved with the IBEW, and it was unusual. Our local had I think we were probably 50-50 in staff of men and women. We were unusual. If we'd go to an IBEW convention there were times when our group of women were the only women there. So things did improve but when I look around now and you say, well is there a woman in labour that we could get that's really strong in a leadership position? Unless you're looking to the healthcare unions, it's tough to find women that are in those types of positions.

Q: Can you identify the reason for that?

GT: No, I don't think I can.

Q: Is it a general environment thing?

GT: It could be. I think it could also be the same thing that women face in regular workplaces, is that there isn't the support there. Like I said, my support network is great. I don't have children that need time from me. So women are still, I think, tasked with that in general, and I think that's what deters you. I don't think I would've had the success I have if the men would've been looking at me saying, well ya but she's off on maternity leave now. So I think that plays a large part of it.

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