

Karen Sputek

KS: Thank you very much for having me and thank you for letting me tell my story. Mine's a fairly unique one with locals. I started my life at the cutting edge of the baby boomers in Kelowna, B.C. Before I was born my father was struck with tuberculosis and he was in a sanatorium for over two years. I never even met my father until I was three years old. Suffice it to say, my mother had to work two jobs in order to keep body and soul together. At that time it was very, very difficult. It wasn't very long after that that my parents separated and we moved to Alberta, starting off in Calgary and then we moved to Edmonton. I grew up on the south side and attended Strathcona Composite High School and married my school sweetheart. My working career started at Alberta Government Telephones at the time. It wasn't very long afterwards, three children in a year and a half, that I decided to become a stay-at-home mom for a while. There wasn't any babysitting available at that time for three babies, plus the fact that I would be paying a babysitter more than I would be earning. I got back into the workforce several years later working part-time at the Celanese plant in their credit union, of all places. After working there for about a year and a half I moved on to full time employment at what was at that time the Gulf Oil Refinery, which is now Petro-Canada. They were doing a job with Bechtel World and I was on the jobsite. It was a lot of experience and a lot of new things that I learned. Bechtel was a huge conglomerate and worked mainly with engineers and such, and I really had a good experience with them. But they moved out of the country. They were the start of the downturn of the economy. In 1983 I was searching for work. I came to a place called Edmonton Housing Authority and was hired by Edmonton Housing Authority in the maintenance department. I moved from there into systems and then on to what is called the lease administration, where we administrate the rents and leases for families with low incomes. Through that time Edmonton Housing Authority was making some huge changes. With all the cuts and everything, we were asked to have our 5% rollback. At that time I was just getting started with the union and getting started with learning about collective agreements in my chapter and so forth. While we were in the fight in negotiations to try and keep our jobs and to prevent the rollback, AUPE decided

that we would be merged or amalgamated from our Local 100 into another local called Local 61. At that time it was mostly Alberta Mortgage and Housing. We weren't very happy about it. As a matter of fact, we fought against it. We wanted to keep our autonomy; we wanted to keep our Local 100. Also, we argued that the other people that were going to be part of this new local were actually essentially our bosses. They gave us our direction on how to manage our resources and how to conduct business. It was a very hard time because many of our members were very upset and turned away from AUPE because of it. We spent about \$20,000 in the courts trying to fight, and we lost. At the time, many of our members were so dissatisfied that they no longer wanted to have anything to do with AUPE. There was virtually no one there to step in. I was still relatively new at the time. Well there's got to be someone there to represent us. I've always felt that if you don't find out about your collective agreements and if you're not a participant, then you can't really have a say in what your organization is doing. Also, being new, I wasn't quite sure why they were trying to do all this or whether it was all that necessary. I was reading the constitution and found that really we had no grounds to stand on. If AUPE wanted to merge us, they had every right to do so. Under Local 61, being new and everything, I was newly elected to the chair of the chapter and started going to meetings at the local council and learned a little more about Alberta Mortgage and Housing. Then I came back to my workplace to try and impart the things that I had learned to my members and to try and let them know that all was not lost. We still had our own collective agreement; we still had our own autonomy. We worked very hard to try and make sure that we managed our own finances and they weren't managed by the local, and we won that little battle. In the meantime, with all the downturn in the economy and the downsizing, Edmonton Housing Authority was still wanting us to take the rollback and negotiated a three-year contract with our 5% rollback, with the promise that there wouldn't be any job losses. Well that was a lie. It wasn't very long later, in 1992, that we lost all of our maintenance department and went down to about 28 members from about 50 or more. It was a very sad time for us, and very hurtful for our chapter and our members. The only thing that did come out of that negotiations, because we were still negotiating when they decided to do the cutbacks, was the fact that we were able to negotiate a severance for our members. Many of our members got up to 43 weeks

severance, which at least helped out a little bit with the job losses. Moving on, Local 61 was then decimated. Alberta Mortgage and Housing was gone, because the federal and provincial government divested itself of social housing. We were left: Local 61 was Edmonton Housing Authority and Calgary Housing, as two very small chapters in Local 61. It wasn't long after that when the powers that be at AUPE decided that we were too small to remain a local, and once again we were merged into what is now called Local 118. At the same time, Calgary Housing was put into the City of Calgary. They lost the battle to remain with AUPE and I believe they're now under CUPE. So it had a long and hard struggle just maintaining our chapter and our local without fighting for any other causes. We had a long, hard struggle just fighting to be. Now at Local 118 we are boards and agencies among all diverse places and areas and diverse workforces. We have the municipalities; we have a lot of the towns – the Town of Ponoka; we just got the Town of Cold Lake. We represent Alberta Pensions Administration and we just got another chapter called AIMCo. What they do is all of the money from the pensions and so on; they're the investment group for all of us. Being such a diverse organization, we're a little different in the fact that each chapter has their own collective agreement. We're under all of the different kinds of legislation from PSERA to the Labour Relations Code and also to the Canada Code. As a result, being the local chair at this point in time, we don't negotiate the collective agreements for each of the chapters; they do that themselves. Each collective agreement is very different and because we represent so many different facets of the workforce, it would be impossible to try and get all those collective agreements in one place and make one out of it all. It just simply wouldn't work. For myself, I started out, as I said, with Edmonton Housing Authority in 1983. At the time, we were fighting to keep our autonomy. It wasn't probably until about '85 or '86 that I said, well we've spent all this money, I should get in there and find out what's going on and find out why AUPE is being so mean to us. Learning and growing and working for a number of years, I gradually became chair of the local and worked in trying to maintain our autonomy and trying to maintain the best for our members as possible. As I said, making sure that the dollars that were at the chapter level remained at the chapter level as much as possible so they could keep their autonomy. Believe you me, when a local is merged and only becomes a chapter, they are not very happy about it. To try and smooth

the waters and make sure that we have the best cohesive group that we could possibly have, it takes a lot of time and effort. That was mainly my role for a couple of years, trying to make sure that we kept our members happy and tried to do the best for them. As time went on, I think it was Ed Mardell that finally said that the monies have to remain at the local, because they were no longer going to audit the chapter's books, and that the local could only keep so much money. There again I fought a losing battle. There were a lot of locals that money came from the locals, remained with the locals, and they couldn't see any reasoning why the funding should remain with the chapter. It was a long drawn out process but we finally got everyone to agree. Still at the local level, we all worked together to make sure that every chapter has as much money as they need to run their chapter business. We've always maintained an open door policy that if any chapter gets into trouble or needs more money, that we are there. We are not there to take away from what they need to do to keep their chapter running; we're there to keep it fair for everyone. All of the local council works on making sure that each chapter has enough money and everyone is treated fairly.

Q: What were some of the challenges you had with the diverse issues of all of the chapters in Local 118?

KS: It is very difficult and that's something we're still working on. We can't possibly be aware of every chapter's issue. As I said, they negotiate their collective agreements and handle everything at the chapter level. I'm more there probably as an advisory role. They contact me if they're having a problem and asking questions to see how things would be regarding grievances and regarding matters through AUPE. That's where I have a major role is trying to keep them informed, trying to keep them up-to-date on all the new policies that AUPE has, trying to make sure that when they're asking questions regarding a grievance or a problem that I may not have all the answers but I'm able to give them the resources that they need to be able to work through it and handle their unique problems. Reading 13 different collective agreements from three different levels of government would be almost impossible to try and make a knowledgeable or informed decision on the best way to proceed in those kinds of matters.

Q: What influenced you along the way during your involvement with unions?

KS: In '87 or '88 I was asked to be part of the women's committee; it was fairly newly formed. Linda Wallace was my chair at the time and I believe she was out of Local 3. A very wonderful person. I got the opportunity early on. I was extremely new and didn't know much about union politics, but I got the chance to go to NUPGE with them one year through the women's committee. That was where the idea of the children's camp came to be. That was one of the most wonderful experiences that I've ever had. Linda Wallace brought the idea back to PE, provincial executive, and they let the idea fly as an experiment. What happened at the time is the locals sponsored the children to go to a union camp where the children learned about collective agreements and how to negotiate and so forth. I'll never forget the kids coming back from their little groups and they actually negotiated an extra 15 minutes to sleep in. It was a fabulous experience. My role at the kids' camp, because I had been a swimming instructor, was to take care of the fun time. That was good. Linda lost her fight with cancer two years later. It was the same time as the downturn with AUPE and all the hardships and not having any money. The Alberta Federation of Labour took over the children's camp. I'm not sure if they're still running it, but the camp at that time was lost. It was a very valuable experience. Through it all, Linda Wallace persevered. There were a lot of people that didn't really want the camp and didn't feel the need for a children's camp when all the locals in AUPE were struggling. But she persevered and she kept that camp running. We went to that camp and used our own vacation time in order just to be there as volunteers. That's how much we all felt about the camp and felt the good work that it was going to do. Then again, her being a mentor of sorts, the women's committee was still in its fledgling stages. At convention and everything it seemed that the women's committee, every time they turned around, were struggling to be accepted, were struggling to get their voice. Quite frankly, it made me mad. I really couldn't accept the fact that people didn't realize that yes, it's a human problem, but it's also women's issues more so than possibly men's issues, because it's the woman that is the caregiver, it's the woman that's the ... let's start over again. It's the woman that 97% of the time is battered. It's the woman that has no place to go. It's the

women that don't have access to their bank accounts. Not only these issues but many more issues that predominantly the women's committee needs to be there. They need to address these issues. I'm back on the women's committee again and we're working very hard, and I'm proud to be there.

Q: What was done to try and keep the city from going to CUPE?

KS: That was the City of Calgary. They had their own collective agreement and their own contract and they were under PSERA. There weren't enough members for us to be able to keep. Unfortunately, Calgary Housing Authority was not all that strong union-wise. A good majority of them felt that they were above the union, didn't need the union. It was a tough struggle but unfortunately the City of Calgary was under CUPE and with the few members that were in Calgary Housing Authority, we did not get success. They were not able to continue; they went under CUPE. The whole organization changed to something different; it really did. They have an entirely different organization than Edmonton Housing did. They have social workers, they take care of mental health buildings, they do all kinds of different things that were under the purview of different organizations and different collective agreements, unfortunately. For Edmonton, Edmonton Housing Authority probably would've been moved to the City of Edmonton but for the fact that we had an executive director that was very progressive, that knew what was happening. In order to save Edmonton Housing Authority, what he did was turn Edmonton Housing Authority into a corporation; so it was one step removed from government. As a corporation, our name changed to Capital Region Housing. So we're now Capital Region Housing Corporation. He also formed a number of different companies under Capital Region Housing Corporation, called CTD Solutions. He also established a foundation, a charitable arm. What we have been able to do since the mid-1990s is we've been buying up property. They've been building; they've been requesting grants and funding. Now that some of the grants and funding have come federally for housing and provincially for housing instead of putting it in one big pile, we have been asking for some of those dollars. We have built some buildings. We partnered with other organizations, such as People in Need and the Boys and Girls Club. We've established a

15-bed apartment for young adults or teenagers that have no place to go. They've got some places for emergency housing. All of those things we didn't have before. We were strictly a property management group and we strictly property managed the housing that the government owned. Now we have some of our own units; we have some of our own buildings. Today myself, I worked on a pilot project called the Home Program. I am now the administrator of the Home Program. The Home Program works with low to moderate income families to help them purchase their own home. We have partnered with private industry, and all of the other people, except for myself, are volunteers. We've got volunteers that are lawyers, home inspectors, realtors – they all volunteer their time. We provide education courses for anyone that's interested. They don't have to be low or moderate income families, just anyone anywhere that's interested in purchasing their own home. We give up-to-date information on what it's like to be a home owner, what you need to do to be able to purchase your own home, what you need to do to get a mortgage. Once you are completely educated, the Alberta Real Estate Foundation gave us some seed funding to set up a pool of down payment assistance funds. Out of those \$50,000 that we originally received in 2004, we have been able to provide down payment assistance in the amount of close to \$400,000. What happens with this pool of funds, the realtors turn back half of their commissions back to the Home Program to put back into the pool of funds so that we can sustain the pool. We give up to \$3,000 in down payment assistance for many families. They do have to meet a certain requirement. Their yearly income has to be under \$54,000. Any family with a yearly income under \$54,000 can request down payment assistance up to \$3,000 as long as they've completed the education program. That's considered a gift; that's a free gift to them to help them with their down payment and to help them move on to home ownership. After they've purchased their homes we remain with them, try and give them pertinent information and try and keep in touch with them to make sure that they remain a success and remain a home owner. It's a wonderful program. I can't say enough about it. It's a pleasure to go to work every day. That's one of the programs that Capital Region Housing Corporation has implemented, number one, for self preservation and number two, to meet the needs of Alberta people to stave off homelessness and to provide a quality of life for everybody.

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