United Nurses of Alberta

Louise Rogers

LR: I'm Louise Rogers. I'm the former [ed, executive ]director] of the Staff Nurses’ Associations of Alberta. I put the "s", associations. I am still a registered nurse. I have been a registered nurse now for about 45 years.

Q: Which hospital?

LR: I'm a graduate originally from the Hospital for Sick Children in Toronto. Then I work here. I don't work clinically any longer; I work in policy and that. But I'm still a registered nurse. My years with the nurses’ union were years where I grew in my understanding of the healthcare system and the need for nurses to be involved at the policy level, advocating on behalf of the public for healthcare. I know that there are many people who say that nurses shouldn't be involved in politics. But they work in probably the biggest political system there is in Canada. I think their voice is needed in order to improve things.

Q: How did the SNA come into existence?

LR: Basically after the Supreme Court decision, the nurses at the University Hospital were just a separate association.

Q: What was that Supreme Court decision?
LR: The Supreme Court decision came out of Saskatchewan, where the nursing association was challenged by the public service union that it was management-dominated. The Supreme Court said yes it is, and therefore said that the nursing association, the licensing body, could not be both the bargaining unit and the licensing body. Therefore the split happened. Then the split happened in Alberta as well. The nurses at the University Hospital were under the Public Service Employee Relations Act; they were not under the Labour Code. So they were not allowed at that time, in '77, to be certified separately as a union. They would have to be certified under the public service, and I believe that would be AUPE as we know it today. Then in 1978 there were changes to the Public Service Employee Relations Act, which allowed the nurses to certify as a bargaining unit separately. That's what the nurses did at the University Hospital, and formed the University of Alberta Staff Nurses’ Association. They received their certification and were a bargaining unit. They bargained with the employer, used lawyers to do some of their work when they needed to. For me, the change came for me personally in 1982, '83 at the University Hospital. I was working in the neonatal intensive care unit. I was a steward for the union, although we didn't call it that because we didn't call ourselves a union. I was a steward, and in the neonatal intensive care unit we had the Taschuk inquiry, where an infant was given an overdose of morphine. The infant was dying and was given an overdose of morphine accidentally. They got the physician out of the country who ordered it, and the nurses were hung out to dry. As much as we rallied round and did the things we needed to do, after that I felt very clearly that things needed to change[ed. at the University Hospital]. We could no longer remain this passive
association. So I ran for president and then immediately after that I put before the annual meeting a choice for the membership. Either we join UNA or we create our own ship and we hire staff. You can't be an active union without staff. So I put the 2 models before them. At that point in time they couldn't see the benefit of going with UNA. So we moved ahead and created our own organization, hiring our first labour relations manager. Then in 1986 our first person left. They did a search with a search company and then went and talked to the legal counsel that we used and then came back and spoke to me and asked me if I would take on the staff position. I wasn't sure I wanted to but then made the decision that I would. It was also that same year in 1986 that the nurses from the Alberta Cancer Board approached us to ask us whether or not they could be certified under us. So that was the beginning of the expansion of the Staff Nurses’ Associations of Alberta and along with that the name change, as we added the Alberta Cancer Board, health unit nurses, and various people who asked to join us. That's why we became the Staff Nurses’ Associations of Alberta.

[can't hear]

...LB: Yes, but there's always been this tension between I'm a professional and I'm a union member and being a member of the house of labour. I go back to a quote from a lady that I have a great deal of respect for, her name was Glenna Rousal. She was the director of working affairs with the Canadian Nurses Association. Her job was to connect with the working nurses, talk about working conditions, or help with that. She met with the
nurses’ unions and did whatever. In one of her books there’s a wonderful quote in there that says that the day that nurses no longer have to worry about their terms and conditions of employment is the day that they became real professionals and were able to practise nursing. It's wonderful. Coming from the Canadian Nurses Association, I think it says it all around that. But the nurses with the staff nurses’ association were no different. There was always this tension, especially at the times of bargaining, about what leverage you're going to use and how you're going to use that. Under the public service employee relations act, even before they changed the labor code and took the right to strike away from all nurses, all of the groups under the Public Service Employee Relations Act had no rights for strike. I guess I would have to say that in 1988 when we had the big nurses’ strike, I think that was a huge test for our people. While I know there are different recollections of what happened at that time, we had the nurses out on strike. The nurses at the University Hospital were not on strike, but we were in the midst of bargaining. We were at the point of where we were coming close to an agreement. We were needing to use whatever leverage we had. We were reporting back to the membership for direction. UNA was on strike. At that meeting that night the University Hospital was packed to the rafters with patients; so we know how many nurses were working. But at that meeting that night there were 800 nurses. We know that many of them came so they could vote to go on strike, and many came so they could vote to not go on strike. What options might you have? That day as I was preparing for that meeting that evening, I made the decision to call the premier's office and ask if we could have a meeting. I was told no. So I said to them, well it will not be a very good message tonight for me to give to the nurses who are
working hard flat out trying to make this system work. It won't be a good message to say, no the premier will not meet with us. Before 5 o'clock that night we had a meeting; the next morning at 10 o'clock we met the premier, the minister of labour, and the minister of health. That evening, we debated all this, and to be quite honest I would have to tell you there were many nurses in tears. They were in tears for their sisters and brothers in UNA who had been forced out. There were tears because of what they were seeing at the workplace. We made the decision that night that we wouldn't take a vote; we would see what happened the next day at the meeting with the premier. After the meeting, we took the whole bargaining team to the meeting with the premier. He wanted to leave because the press was all outside. So he wanted to leave separately to us. We just listened at the crack of the door as the premier talked to the press. I turned to the bargaining team and said, we've got our increase and we've got our next step on the grid; we got the things. We settled our collective agreement within the next week or so. Yes, there was tension between the two unions, there's no doubt about it, a lot of tension. But at the same time I would have to say that I believe that the leadership of the unions, both unions, were respectful of one another, attempted to do what work they needed to do to move things along. But I do believe that that was also a maturing moment for the Staff Nurses’ Association.

[can't hear]
LR: Absolutely. To be quite honest, I believe in many ways that the health authorities are really just a representative of the government, and it would almost be better if the government was at the table. It might make it easier for the nurses, because the government would hear directly from the nurses, not through the health authorities.

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LR: They do, there's no doubt about. If the nurses, especially a lot of our younger nurses, because our younger nurses became nurses when there was already a nurses’ union. Sometimes we can take that for granted that that's the way it's always been. But it was hard work, sweat, and tears that has brought nursing and the nursing profession to where it is today. There are many nursing executives and managers who will say it is the nursing unions that have brought the profession to what it is today. It is necessary for the nurses to engage in that political activity, not only for bringing the profession along, but in many ways they know what the system is like and where the weaknesses in the healthcare system are that affect the patients. We can't expect that sick people or our aged population are able to be out there rallying and mustering the troops to ensure that the message gets to the people that need to hear it. I think nurses have an obligation as part of their professional ethics, to be sure that they are advocating. If we actually look in the new code of ethics, there's a piece that is obligating nurses to work to ensure that the resources are there and used in the appropriate way. We're coming along as a profession. We maybe have lagged behind some of our nursing leaders like Heather Smith, because Heather
Smith has been there advocating and mustering the troops around healthcare and public healthcare for years.

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LR: After the passing of the Health Authorities Act, it became very clear that the health authorities were not interested in having different cultures at different institutions. UNA and SNAA began some discussions with regards to forming a new body. Those discussions were very amicable, a fair amount of blue sky, not sure whether we always saw reality in where we were going. But they were good discussions. Out of this, when we started talking about structure, what would a new structure look like? We were trying to look at positions, not people. Before we started it we said to the staff in both organizations, there'll be a place for everybody. But I decided that I would make a declaration that if we created a new structure that I would not seek a position in the new structure. I was really making that declaration because from my perspective. I felt that it would be important in a new structure that someone in a very senior leadership position not be seen to have baggage that perhaps people could think that they brought with us. That was my only reason for making the declaration. It wasn't long after that that, for whatever reason, and I'm not exactly sure. I'm not avoiding it, I'm not exactly sure, when I say for whatever reason, that discussions began to break down. In fact they broke down completely, to the point where SNAA was actually looking at seeking to see if there were groups of nurses from UNA who might like to join them as well. I would say the tension was very high. The tension was very high because being a smaller union, I think there were many people who saw what the government was doing, was basically giving them
no choice. In some ways they were grieving the fact that we're losing membership in various places, not because our people are voting to leave, but because the government has imposed this structure upon us. With that there, and then the activity to see if they could increase their numbers, the tension got even higher. Then in 1997 I made a decision to leave the Staff Nurses. We were just about to enter into bargaining and there was other bargaining going on. So they asked me if I would complete the bargaining on a contract. I said I'd be happy to. And also would I continue to represent them before the Labour Board with all of these talks at the Labour Board that were happening, supposed hearings. We'd have one person on the stand all day while we had how many lawyers ask them questions. So I agreed that I would do that. Literally it was, and I'm sure you've had this description, literally it was this ballroom in this hotel set up with every union and their lawyers and their senior labour relations people. Then the employer and all their crew. Basically after a few days it became clear that we'd be there for years before we'd get anything settled. That's when the Labour Board, and Deb Howse was chairing the Labour Board at the time, or chairing this panel. So they decided that they would propose mediation by the big mediator they brought in from Ontario. While these discussions were going on, I had talked to SNAA about perhaps proposing to UNA that we just amalgamate with them. But propose some things that would serve SNAA as well so that people could feel confident that their voice was being heard and that they had a place at the executive table, and various things around that. So we had talked about all of that and what we might do and what would be the right timing. We weren't sure on any of that, but we were pretty clear that SNAA needed to join. Thus it was that in the midst of those
mediation sessions, when he was determined that he was going to get a settlement out of us…

Q: Who's he?

LR: The mediator, and I can't remember his name. The mediator from Ontario was determined that he was going to get a settlement. He was the one keeping us there. It was clear to me that the employer was attempting to use the division between the two groups to their advantage. From my perspective, we needed to usurp that, that we would get in there first. So at the middle of the night as we're having our caucus and doing our things, I said to them, I think it's time that we made our move. Amongst tears and various things, we said yes, we'll make our move. So we went over to the caucus room that UNA was using, asking if we could meet with Heather and their lawyer and David. I don't know who else was in the room, and we said we didn't care who was there. Said to them, we are proposing that we join you. It was sort of like, okay and what are the conditions? We said, no we're not talking about a new structure, we're talking about that we will become part of you, and yes we want a few things out of this. The reaction was one of disbelief and overcome by relief as well, that the nurses were now going to stand together. Not just stand together in our beliefs and our philosophy, but actually stand together as one organization. It was really a very poignant. . .

It was a very poignant moment. And a very historical moment, As we said later about the health authority, you need to be careful what you ask for.
LR: The nurses as a group of people have the greatest respect of the public. I believe that their voice will be listened to by the policy makers, and therefore it's important that nurses stand together to go to those policy makers on behalf of the public. The public healthcare system is the one that will make the difference to the people in Canada and Alberta. I can't emphasize enough the importance of nurses being that voice.

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