

Jenna Knight

Q: What role does the union play in your life?

JK: I think that it plays a significant role on many levels. I've been a part of the executive board now for over ten years. So I have a level of responsibility within the union where I'm in a position where I can now mentor a lot of newer members, new nurses, make decisions on their behalf, and participate in some of the processes that we have in place to represent our members. I still appreciate and utilize the support we get from the union in my workplace as a grassroots member as well. We're all dealing with the uncertainty and the excessive number of changes that have been brought to our work environment because of COVID. As we all work together to understand how this impacts us personally for safety and the patients we're caring for, we look to the union for guidance. We find ourselves in a place where we're so focused on providing our patient care and making sure we have the right supplies, such as PPE, to do the care we need to do, and we really rely on the union to do the background work to ensure that we are safe and we have someone to speak up for us and ensure our employer is implementing safety measures that are appropriate. ... I still remember the day-- it was a Saturday actually--, when we were surprised to find a manager show up to our unit that day and say, as of this moment right now, please wear a mask all the time; please wear eyewear. It instilled a level of fear in us. We were just mandated to use new levels of PPE without a lot of education brought to us at the same time. We felt really in the dark and unsure of what was going on. When these changes are made instantly on a weekend, you don't have your immediate manager there or educators on the unit to support you and provide the information. A lot of times the employer would implement new measures without realizing we don't even have a lot of the supplies that they're saying are mandated now. So it created a lot of chaos. Thankfully, we were able to contact union members 24 hours a day and find some level of certainty and support in what I describe again and emphasize as a very chaotic environment.

Q: As a new nurse right out of nursing school, were you aware of the union?

JK: My exposure to the union prior to nursing school, just the union movement in general, was extremely limited. I didn't come from a family that worked with or really discussed unionism. In nursing school, I recall, looking back, it did not stand out to me at the time. During your studies you're focused on retaining all this information and getting the best marks you can. You have no idea what you're actually being set up for and what you're about to step into. But looking back now that you ask me that, I recall an LRO being invited out to one of our classes, and I think I recall him holding a collective agreement and showing us that this would be our contract. Of course, at that time we scrolled down the lines looking like, oh a new nurse makes this much an hour, and that's probably as much as my class would've paid attention to this union representative. If I'm being honest, at that time I would've confused CARNA with UNA.

Q: What got you involved?

JK: I remember, when I was in school, it was a time when our nursing program didn't focus at all on resume building or interviews. I remember very vividly my last instructor saying, don't worry about that; if you have a pulse, you have a job in the nursing profession. You don't have to worry. I graduated and then Duckett came on the scene and there was what was called a hiring freeze. I probably applied for at least 50 jobs and I wasn't hearing anything back. It was devastating to me, because our nursing program had set us up to believe that the minute you graduate you would find a job, no problem. So I went through weeks and weeks of waiting by the phone. I think out of the 50 plus applications, I received two interview opportunities. Of those two I was thankfully successful on one of them. But it was a casual position which may have led eventually to a temporary position. But there was nothing permanent available to a new graduate at that time. There was really nothing with any significant amount of job security. I remember going to my union office. I'm really grateful now that I think about it, that I'm in a hospital where the union local executive are very accessible. I think that's a takeaway for me on reflection--if they hadn't been visual and vocal about meeting new members, that opportunity may not have happened and it would've changed the course of my participation with the union. But them being so accessible and present from the beginning of my acceptance... I worked for Alberta Health Services in my new job. I went to them with so many questions, thinking, okay, I thought I was going to have a permanent job. I don't. What are my rights as a temporary

worker? What do I need to worry about? I went with a long list of questions, and of course they were full of a lot of great answers and direction. I learned so much on each visit. I almost became a regular visitor in my local executive office. Because I naturally became knowledgeable about the collective agreement, and initially it was out of my own interest and wellbeing, they offered to send me to the AGM. I mentioned before that I didn't really know what that meant. They just said, here, you get paid; it's a great opportunity to learn as a new nurse. I thought, great. I like new opportunities, I like learning opportunities, and so far my experience with the union had been one that was especially supportive in a time for me of a lot of uncertainty as a new grad not being able to find the job that I was promised. I attended my first AGM and I think it'll still bring up emotion for me. It was just very inspiring.

Q: What was it about it that was inspiring?

JK: I think you don't understand the conditions that nurses used to work in. . . For myself, there are just so many days when you go home after a long day of work and think, hmm, I feel like there's a long list of things that didn't go well. You unfortunately, especially as a new nurse, think it's because you're not good enough: you need to do better; you need to be faster. It's some of the indirect messaging or narrative you receive in your workplace. You need to work quicker, do better with less, and you need to be the change. It was incredible to be around a group of people that voiced that they had experienced the same thing as you. So you're not alone. It was inspiring to see and hear about the history of UNA where these people had been there before, they had felt the struggle, but together they made a significant change. I just found that incredibly inspiring.

Q: Was there a point at which you realized that had come about?

JK: I was just completely naïve to UNA's history. I didn't even know a lot about the strike. I personally went into nursing. I didn't have any nurses in my family, I didn't know anyone. Not only is it the camaraderie of the nurses going up to the mike and sharing their stories, it's incredible to have nurses from all over the province in one room. My experience is primarily in an urban centre in a large hospital. I have no idea what it's like to be a rural nurse who is up in a

community with less supports than I have. I think it's important to hear those stories and it changes you and evokes emotion in you. But it also is so interesting that, despite how different our workplaces might be, we share this common thread of issues that you realize we're determined to change together. That's inspiring. The AGM is a great opportunity for UNA has always had education pieces as part of the business, whether it be a presentation or a video that's provided. I just took it all in. I had no idea how political--I was naïve to how political the whole healthcare issues are. I think I went into the AGM thinking I had built up this set of skills to provide care at a bedside and I was valuable in that sense. I walked out of the AGM knowing that I was feeling inspired, and it felt incredible that I can also make a difference along with the other nurses in my profession by making some positive change for patient care and Albertans in general. That's powerful; it felt so powerful.

Q: Tell me when you first learned about the strikes in UNA's history.

JK: I feel that there's definitely a significant risk of newer nurses not understanding or valuing what we currently have as part of our UNA contract. If you don't know UNA's history, you don't know where we've come from. That was one of the most impactful things for me, was learning how little nurses made, how little their initial contracts would've included clauses for speaking out on behalf of patients and the quality of care that they get, and the pushback that nurses once received for even wanting that in their contract, and the amount of work that was put into getting to where we are today. I think I heard one particular story about a nurse--she brought her child to the line and said, well if you're going to arrest me, you have to take my child as well. And they did. I think there are a lot of nurses that don't understand how much was invested in getting to where we are today.

Q: Were you surprised to learn how recently these things have happened, not necessarily only in UNA history, but in Alberta history?

JK: When I hear about the stories, I find myself thinking, where was I in that year? The fact is I was around and these things were happening around me. I didn't realize they were happening

around me. But it is important to note that this was less than a few decades ago that this was going on and these significant changes were happening.

Q: Is it fair to say that had it not been for the union nurses might now be where they were 30 years ago?

JK: I can't see us being where we are now compared to 30 years ago without the union. It requires a force. . . It requires the organization of the nurses to do this together. The strength came from doing it collectively and it being organized and strategic. It was the right thing to do. Sometimes in the hardest of times the right thing is achievable but you need someone to help you along the way and strategize that for you. I think that's what the union has provided for nurses: they kind of paved the way for the grassroots members to achieve what they know is right.

Q: What learnings from that knowledge of history will you bring into your work now?

JK: I think how learning about UNA's history is most important for me is to, well I personally value where we're at in a way I had not before in terms of our rights within the collective agreement, and feeling that safety that we're provided with in terms of speaking up in the workplace. I think that I am at a place now where I can offer mentorship to nurses who may not understand or know anything about strike history within our profession, the collective agreements, the advances with negotiations. I think I am extremely motivated to share that history. I believe that you don't know, I'm tripping up... but you don't know what you don't know. I want to help share and spread that information amongst members in my workplace, and I imagine there'll be some as motivated as I am to learn more about it. I think when the time comes where we're asked to make a decision about what we're going to do and stand for in this round's negotiations, I think it's important for the members to be informed. Informed means having a good understanding of UNA's past and history.

Q: Is it important for nurses to keep pushing back?

JK: I think not only have we been technically in our extended rounds of--I guess I should say it like this. Not only have we been without a new collective agreement for a number of months, we're also all under the burden created by COVID. I think knowing UNA's history, knowing that people have been in this chaotic, desperate place in the past, but have achieved some really wonderful positive outcomes for nursing wages, nursing work conditions, and most importantly the quality of care that we can provide at the bedside, I think it's important to remember that and share these stories amongst the staff right now that are burnt out and might be at that point of feeling hopeless. It might just spark a little bit of hope in people in a time when we can all use a little bit more hope.

Q: Are there any COVID stories you'd like to share?

JK: The most obvious effects of COVID are the people working on the COVID units – the ICUs that are maxed out in terms of resources. But I think it's important to recognize it's affecting everyone. For me personally, it's been the tiniest of interactions. At the very beginning, for example, I remember I was told by someone in a position of authority that if I was going to use one more N95 mask that I was going to be reported to a higher level of management, and questioning my judgment. There were a lot of ways that you felt not in control at any point during this experience with COVID. You don't feel that you have a lot of control in this environment. You want to be informed. We've been trained to make evidence-based decisions, and the evidence is new and ever-changing. We want to stay safe, ultimately at the end of the day. That tiny interaction of almost being threatened, because I wanted to provide the care to my patient, doing it in the most safe manner, that left me feeling extremely unsupported and fearful in my workplace, which is just a level of stress you don't need in what is already a stressful environment. So that stands out to me as to what it was like initially, and that has led to what I'm thankful for: multiple discussions between the employer and the union to, for the most part, be on the same page about what is acceptable for PPEs and ensuring that our nurses have access to it. That is one story that sticks with me. Now fast forward many months later. I'm personally just feeling like there's no break. Obviously we're being asked and sometimes even mandated to work double the length of shift you would normally work. That affects your homelife. I've personally had to pay a babysitter to stay the night with my daughter, which is

new for me. I also just think you don't get a break. Even on the few days that I have off, my phone is bombarded with messages from the employer, respectfully but still essentially begging you to come to work on the only days that you do have off with your family. It's always in the back of your head; you can't help but wonder if your colleagues are struggling. We're human. We don't want to think about or know that our colleagues may be under a lot of stress doing work that is almost unmanageable, and you take that home with you. I just personally feel that I really haven't had much of a mental break from the idea of COVID, the burden of COVID in the hospital, and its effects on my specific workplace.

Q: Has the union been able to help with that at all?

JK: Absolutely. I think the union has done a good job of having--I think that they've been in touch with members or had opportunities to have discussion with members or leadership at the different sites on a more frequent basis. I think they do such a good job of sensing when people need extra support and adjusting how much you reach out to the members, how many publications to implement. Let's face it. We're in a time where a lot of people vent or spend a lot of time on social media. I think UNA has had a really positive impact by posting supportive messages and information via social media as well. A member who may just feel like they've given their all, they don't want to seek out direct connection with the union in the more traditional sense. They are still feeling supported and feeling like they have a place to get all the information that they may require, through easier means as well.

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

JK: Essentially I hope that this year, this AGM is coming up I know, and the AGM as I mentioned was such a, it was my kind of segue into really becoming involved with the union. Not only that, but seeing that our profession is – I'm a registered nurse – I'm just so proud to be in this profession. Initially I went in I think because, I'll be honest with you, I think a lot of people suggested that I do, because I'm female and I had a science background. It was a pretty biased or stereotypical suggestion. I knew that we cared a lot for patients and had a lot to give at the bedside. But I'm so proud now to be part of an organization that's capable of having an impact

on so many levels in society. I hope that this AGM coming up, although it's not in person, I hope that we can reach out to members who may be struggling, may be looking for those educational or motivational pieces and experiences and connections with other nurses across the province so that they know that they're not alone. We're going to fight together and make a positive change.

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