

UNA Centennial Project-Nursing History-David Harrigan

I Interviewer

S Speaker

S I grew up -- was born and raised in B.C., and did all my schooling in B.C. But by the time I graduated as a registered -- as a psychiatric nurse, there were no jobs for nurses in B.C. So I came to Alberta with the idea of staying for about six months and then heading back to Vancouver. And the first day of work, actually, in 1982 -- September of '82, I started working at the Calgary General Hospital. It was then the Calgary General Hospital. It's a hole in the ground now. The -- one of the nurses on the unit approached me and explained that the reason I was hired was because another nurse had retired, and that's what created the vacancy, and that nurse had been the ward rep, and they said it was only fair that I become the ward rep for UNA because the person whose job I took was the ward rep. So I became the ward rep. And it seemed okay to me. So I said, sure, that's fine. And that's how I first got involved in UNA. So I was a ward rep immediately. I think within a couple of years I became the local president of UNA and again in an odd sort of way. The nurse who had been local president at the time, she had applied for and been successful in getting an out of scope position in becoming a unit manager. So they needed a new executive. I was going to be away on holiday. So I wrote to the executive and indicated I'd be willing to serve on the executive in any position that they thought was necessary other than treasurer 'cause I didn't want to be the treasurer. And then I went on vacation, and I came back to discover that in absentia, I had been elected as president of -- of local one. So it --

I A hard fought campaign.

S It was a hard fought campaign, but it doesn't always work that way luckily. And it's not that there's no interest in it. I just happened to be either in the right place at the right time or the wrong place at the right time in each of those occasions.

I Can I just interrupt to ask about framing?

S That probably would have been in '84, '85, somewhere around there. What I wanted was to be on the grievance committee, and that's what I was hoping. But the assembly in their wisdom chose otherwise. So you're going to have to lead me here now.

I Okay. And then -- then you went onto the provincial negotiating committee and at some point or other you became provincial vice president or --

S Yeah, by '87, I think, I was elected as UNA provincial vice president. I wasn't officially on the UNA negotiating committee. I was the vice president. Got elected in -- at the annual meeting in 1987, which was in the fall of '87. The -- I wasn't on that -- officially on that negotiating committee. What had happened is it was a -- a strike. Day one of the strike my -- at the time, I was living in Calgary. And as vice president, a couple of days a week coming up to Edmonton, but not on a -- not a -- I wasn't living in Edmonton and wasn't here all the time. My intention was during the strike to spend the time in Calgary. But I got a call I think it was the first day the strike began from provincial office asking if I could come up for that afternoon. There was going to be an important meeting of the executive that afternoon. And so I came up hoping to get back that night, but figuring I might not get back until the next day and ended up staying for the whole 19 days that the strike was on, spending most of it with the negotiating committee and sort of acting as the liaison between the committee and the provincial office.

I Did you end up doing a lot of public media work at that time?

S There was a lot of media work involved.

I Taking the cheque down to the --

S Taking the -- yeah, we had to -- we were fined. Actually, I didn't bring it down. I had to sign the cheque for -- we were fined the first time, I think, 250,000, and the -- I was -- there was bargaining again the next day. So I was with the committee again the next day. I think the secretary treasurer at the time took it down to the courthouse.

I So that was the long strike, but the weather was bad and --

S The weather was terrible. It was about 35 below. I remember one day there was going to be a big rally at the legislature, and even though the bargaining team was meeting and there was bargaining that day, I wanted to go to the rally and to be able to come back and talk to the committee about the rally 'cause it's really -- one of the things about bargaining is it gets really difficult for the negotiating committee because they're separate and they're not -- it's easy to get -- not realize what's going on because you're always stuck in the same room in a hotel somewhere. You don't realize what's happening. So my plan was to go to the rally at the legislature and be able to report back to the bargaining team, and hopefully, you know, get their spirits up and that sort of thing. But I remember going there, and it was 30 below, 35 below, and it was tremendous turnout. It was just packed with people. And I remember going back and saying to the bargaining team, you know, and trying to raise their spirits: This was great. It was that many people. I remember the first question they said, well, who was there? You know, was this person there? Was this person there? And I had to say, I have no idea. It was 35 below. Everybody was wearing a parka and there was somebody with blue eyes and somebody with brown eyes. Other than that,

everybody looked the same. You know, there were parkas and gloves and boots. But it was -- it was quite the -- quite the time.

I So Trudy made the point that out of this major first -- well, the biggest province-wide strike by nurses and major illegal strike, UNA didn't make a lot of gains. Can you talk a little bit about the resolution of that strike? How -- how that strike was ended and --

S Yeah, there weren't a whole lot of giant issues at the bargaining table in terms of contract issues. It was more of a -- in terms of the bargaining, it was more of a respect. I mean the reality of '88 is the employers just did not believe that the nurses were prepared to take action. And I think they were looking for a three percent rollback or something like that. And they just didn't, in their wildest dreams, think that the strike would actually happen. I remember the -- I think it was the night before the actual strike or two days before when we were trying to explain to employers, like, you have to get serious. People are going to take action very, very soon, and they just didn't believe it. So -- but there was -- there was a small increase at the end of the strike, but there wasn't -- and there were no takeaways. And that was the main thing that was achieved from the '88 strike in the immediate -- in the immediate sense. When it really happened was the next time we went into bargaining. In 1990 when we went into negotiations, the approach the employers took was obviously a lot different. And they went into the 1990 round understanding now that nurses were serious and just because they had got the government to pass this law, that didn't mean that they could do whatever they want. So in 1990 we went to the bargaining table. By that time, I was the chief spokesperson, chief negotiator at the bargaining table, and we found they treated us with complete respect. In terms of salary, there were increases of about 19 percent. At one point, we -- part way through the contract there was a reduction in the work week; so full-time employees got an additional day off a month without any reduction to their -- in their take home pay. There were improvements in shift differential charge pay, just about every area of the collective agreement. And although no one ever said it out loud at the table, I don't think there's any doubt that it was, in fact, a direct result of 1988, and the employers' understanding that, you know, nurses and UNA were a force to be reckoned with and they have to take it seriously.

I Was what really provoked the strike the rule by the labour board that the nurses couldn't take a -- hold a vote?

S In '88? I think it really did. In '88 what had happened was there was starting to be a lot of pent-up anger. And -- and the employers weren't taking it seriously at the bargaining table because they didn't think they had to. They thought, well, there are laws, and we got the government to pass the law. We don't need to worry about it anymore. That was just making people more angry. And then the nurses, as a result of the demand-setting meeting, said we're going to hold a strike vote. The employers went to the labour board to say -- wanted

the labour board to issue an order to say nurses weren't allowed to have the vote, which they did. And the board ruled that nurses were not permitted to have a strike vote. And I don't think there's any doubt. We had one of the largest turnouts we've ever had because it just had the opposite effect. It just reinforced to the nurses, you know, What do you mean we can't even hold a vote, you know? And just insulted them more, and as a result, there was a bigger turnout than there otherwise would have been and I think it bolstered their -- their confidence in terms of, we have to take a stand here and show these people that we're serious. So in the 90s, you could tell that the employers' approach to bargaining was completely different. Not only did they recognize that they had to at least listen, not necessarily agree with everything, but take it seriously. I think it was -- there were other strike votes that went on, and it wasn't until the late 90s, you know, when the employer again tried to make efforts to stop strike votes. I mean they realized it was just counterproductive and just throwing gasoline on a fire to try to get an order to say people aren't even allowed to vote.

I And what happened in '94 and '95 with the huge rollbacks in the healthcare budgets in the province from the federal and provincial governments?

S Yeah, that -- those were -- those were odd times as well.

I Is that worth talking about in the history? I think it's a significant --

S Well, yeah, it's -- it's -- the tables turned very, very fast. There was the early 90s where we would go to the bargaining table and get pretty well everything that we asked for and huge increases. And I remember at the time -- Article 15 is our -- the collective agreement where it talks about layoff and recall. I don't think most nurses had ever read it. It just wasn't a big issue. And nobody -- I mean nursing is always fairly cyclical, but there had never been experiences with layoffs. And then in -- in the mid-90s, there were massive cutbacks everywhere, massive layoffs, everything, and then -- and the employers were asking for financial rollbacks -- wanted the nurses to agree to a lesser salary. And, in fact, initially they were successful in the -- convincing, not just nurses, I think they convinced all of Alberta that, you know, if we all just take a little -- take a bit of rollback -- you know, I'll bring home five percent less money, but it'll mean there'll be fewer layoffs. And that's what people were led to believe. And so the nurses accepted it. You know, we put it to the members and said, Look, here's the employers' offer. They're serious about it. And the nurses voted to accept a rollback thinking that it would avoid more layoffs -- it would avoid massive layoffs. In fact, it didn't, and the government and the hospitals went even more so. And so the nurses accepted rollbacks and following that, there were massive layoffs. Some hospitals closed completely, but almost every hospital started cutting back registered nursing.

I And by now, has that started to recover in nursing numbers or --

S Well, now we're back to -- to where we were at the beginning of the 90s. It went from a huge glut of nurses, and people were being laid off all over the place. I can remember in the mid-90s talking to university students, a class of nurses, and they were in their final year. They were all graduating. It was about two months before graduation, and almost all of them had jobs lined up. All of them had jobs lined up in the U.S. There wasn't a single one that was staying in Canada. And I remember speaking to them and trying to explain to them that, you know, nursing is cyclical and governments just don't have a good idea of long-term planning. Their long-term planning is usually about two years down the road. And I remember students saying, things are different. There will never be a shortage. We'll never be able to come back. In fact, last year or this year even, there's a huge shortage of nurses. Calgary alone -- just the Calgary Regional Health Authority I think estimates that they're going to need another 7,000 registered nurses in the next few years. Nobody has any idea where these people are coming from.

I And what about -- so by 1999, 2000, the '88 strike is a bit of a memory now. Has that affected bargaining? It's been a long time since nurses have gone on -- taken a major job action.

S It is. Actually one other thing though occurred and that was, I think, in 1997, where we came close to job action. And the big issue then was in charge -- nurse in charge. And some of the hospitals were making noises about no longer having a nurse in charge. Every unit had to have somebody in charge, but at the time, the employers and some of the hospitals were saying, let's not have anybody in charge, or if it is, maybe it doesn't need to be a nurse -- a registered nurse. Maybe it can be somebody other than a registered nurse. And that was becoming a big issue. So in '97 that was the major issue. We ended up -- at the time, the employers were not prepared to agree with what we were proposing, which is there will always be a nurse in charge of each unit. I don't even think at the time they were willing to agree that there would be a person in charge of each unit. And they were looking to say that they should have one person in charge of three or four units. So in '97 again we had a strike vote, and it came very close. It came right down -- I mean the employers back then, they could still remember '88 although it was a decade almost by now, but they didn't try to stop the strike vote. They didn't want to escalate things; so they allowed the strike vote. Again, we had a really good turnout, 97 percent were in favour of job action if necessary, but we were able to resolve it. I think we counted the ballots about 11:00 -- 9:00 -- 11:00 at night I remember the -- we were bargaining over at the hotel, and people at the office had counted up all the ballots and came over and told us the results. The employers were still there. We mentioned to them, you know, here are the vote results. You know, it comes up. You know, we said, look, the nurses are serious. Here 97 percent -- or I can't remember the exact number. I think it was 80 -- in the high 80s percent said that they're prepared to take job action in order to achieve the nurses in charge. And as a result, we got not everything we wanted, but the employers that evening

agreed that for every unit where there was a nurse in charge, there will still continue to be a nurse in charge. And that's -- that's in the agreement still today. But that wouldn't have occurred without -- without a strike vote. By then we got to -- I guess it was the next round or I guess it was the round after that, 2001, again the employers were still, I think, recognizing or remembering '88, and at the time, there was a huge shortage of nurses. And so once again, we were able to take advantage of that and most nurses got about a 30, 40 percent salary increase. We got increases in almost every provision in the agreement because they -- even the government and the health regions recognized there was a shortage of nurses. We have to make life and working conditions better for nurses if we're going to be able to attract them from other provinces. It's not like British Columbia where we have the beautiful mountains and ocean and everyone wants to -- to come and live here. It's 40 below sometimes in the winter. And so I think at that time, the regional health authorities made a conscious decision: let's try and make Alberta the best working-wise for registered nurses and they'll be able to attract people, which had some success. And I remember after we signed the agreement in 2001, there were a lot of nurses that were coming from other provinces and saying, Well, come and work in Alberta; they have better working conditions. I think they've sort of forgotten about that and the tables are starting to turn again. And, you know, this most recent round, the employers, the regional health authorities, and the government were back to more how they were acting in '88, which is, you know, we can threaten them. And certainly the last round of bargaining, I don't think a day went by when every time we're at the table, the regional health authorities mentioned, you know, the government's prepared to just legislate your contract. And they had done that, of course, in B.C. and in Saskatchewan, and when they did it to those provinces, there was no huge uprising, and so I think Alberta was starting to think, well, you know, maybe we can do it here. You know, it took us about a year and a half, but we were able to negotiate an agreement without rollbacks and the last one, and covering our people's main concern about what the employers at the time wanted, which was to just shift nurses back and forth.

I So overall, you've seen a lot of the history of UNA and can you comment sort of on what nurses have achieved for themselves and their profession by being unionized? It's made a huge difference.

S Oh, just in terms of salary. I looked -- actually, I looked just before I came in here 'cause when I first -- when I became -- accepted this job as Director of Labour Relations, at the time, the rates of pay for registered nurses were -- I think they started at \$15 an hour and they went up to \$20 an hour. And -- no, sorry, \$15 an hour and they went up to \$18 an hour for the top rate. Right now, in our collective agreement, a registered nurse start rate is \$27 an hour and the end rate is \$35 an hour. So, in salary alone it has almost doubled in -- since '89. So there are huge changes in that. But I think there's also been a real recognition on the parts of regional health authorities, administrators, health administrators, and governments that nurses, number one, are professionals,

and have to be taken seriously as professionals, paid accordingly, treated accordingly, so they're not, you know, handmaidens or, you know, in the old days. But there's also a recognition that they're a force that, when they're able to join together and really push, then they're going to be successful in doing so. There's still some huge challenges on the -- and some of the governments as of late have been using, I think, the successes that UNA has had and the successes that the nurses had and trying to turn it around and -- because one of the problems that still exists is the staffing situation. And it's -- if anything, it's probably gotten worse because -- because of governments' reluctance to spend as much money or to spend enough money. There's probably less staffing in hospitals now than there used to be. And so staffing and nurse patient ratios and those sorts of things are actually even more of an issue now than they used to be. And I think the government and the employees are -- have made a concerted effort to try and convince nurses that that's their fault. The reasons that we're so short of nurses are because it costs so much money and you've priced yourself out of the market. That -- we can't afford to have any more, and the reason we're short-staffed is because you guys cost so much money. And there's been a big PR in the campaign in the last few years about that. Not sure that it's been completely successful, but it's certainly -- that's the effort. But I think that's going to be the next challenge. You know, in the 70s the professional responsibility committee--it was a challenge to get that. That's been achieved. I think the next one is probably to get guaranteed ratios; staffing ratios, I expect, will be the next challenge. I think, for the most part, in terms of the financial stuff, you know, nurses have been very successful and will continue to be. I think it's more of the professional issues that are going to be the big challenges.

I That's good. I voted to that ...

S Okay....

S Did somebody talk about the 70s and the PRC and stuff 'cause --

I Yeah, Trudy did as well.

S Okay.

I And I think Heather did as well actually --

S Right.

I 'cause we did this with Heather. And I didn't even hear all of what Heather did. Don talked to Heather for about an hour or so. So it was pretty extensive. So between the two of you,.. continuity.... Little bit of conflicting details.... Trudy thought the first fine was 150,000. I think you're right. I think the first time was 250,000.

S No. Yeah, the first one was 250.

I The second one was...

S The second one was 150, and it was less because we had gone back to work -- we'd gone back to work by the time the fine came down. So it was less. The first one was 250, and the 150. And then there was a whole bunch of local -- it's not a whole bunch. A small number of locals were fined as well, and individuals --

I And individuals.

S -- were fined.

I 'Cause we talk a lot about... being in court...Gretta....

S Right. Right.

I You would have been in the other courtroom, I take it, where -- or were you in the courtroom when the criminal ...-- 'cause there were two courtrooms going at the same --

S Well, there was and, in fact, there were a couple down in Calgary. And at one point I did go down to Calgary for some of the court action. 'Cause what had happened earlier in the strike was the -- at the time, the Children's Hospital was under different legislation than the other groups. So the Children's Hospital and the Foothills Hospital were both under Public Service Employee Relations Act, and the other groups were under -- it was then the Labour Relations Act. And strikes were prohibited in both, but the Public Service Employee Relations Act was a bit tougher and more clear. And so first the -- they came out with an order saying you couldn't strike, and you weren't allowed to picket the hospitals. And then it was the next day, I think, that -- or two days later they came out with an order than said no one is allowed to picket at the Children's Hospital. And what had happened was all of the Calgary nurses then said, again, because they were angry at being told what to do, they all decided that the next day no one would picket at any of the hospitals except the Children's Hospital. But I remember that court matter and Sheila Greckol -- 'cause I remember 'cause they led all this evidence and, you know, Greckol's response was, We have no submissions on that, My Lord, you know. What do you say, you know? So -- but there -- I don't think there was individual -- oh, that's right. I think the individuals --

I I think some got fined, didn't they?

S Yes, they did, but I think the Calgary ones got found not guilty and the Edmonton ones were found guilty.

I There was -- there was -- the defence ... couldn't have been notified properly and --

S Right, right, right. And it came out different ways. But I think it was Calgary. They were found not guilty because there was no evidence that they had been notified 'cause they posted the signs in the hospital and then proved that they weren't in the hospital to see the signs. But I think --

I Because they were out on the picket.

S Because they were on the picket line. And in Ed -- that's right. So in Calgary the courts found the individuals not guilty. In Edmonton they found them guilty and said, Don't be ridiculous. Everybody knows there was a strike and that it was illegal and they don't need to -- to see the signs. And after that strike, they changed the labour code in a number of ways. A lot of it was to get around that. The other -- and I don't know if anybody mentioned -- the last item resolved at the '88 strike -- back then, the Labour Relations Act said that an employer -- if there was an illegal strike, the employer could make application to the labour board to cease deducting union dues. And during '88, a number of employers did that probably by the time the strike was -- at the end, probably all the employers did that. And so part of the back to work conditions that we were looking for was we wanted the employer to withdraw those applications because UNA had no money at the time, and if -- if the employers weren't going to be sending in the union dues, it was going to be problems with trying to continue as an organization. So we were -- as part of the back to work, we wanted the employer to agree to withdraw, and they wouldn't agree. Actually that hung it up for another day and a half before they -- but eventually, the employers agreed to withdraw those applications. They labour -- after that, one of the big changes in the Labour Relations Code was to change that, so now if there's an illegal strike, the employer doesn't make an application; that was the employer doesn't even have the authority to withdraw it. The labour board on their own decides whether or not. And if it's an illegal strike, it's sort of an automatic thing. And that was one of the changes 'cause they didn't want a union to be able to do what we did, which is negotiate the employers to withdraw the application. And then they made a bunch of changes in --

I Then they actually applied that to AUPE.

S They actually applied it to AUPE, yes.

I Well, good. That's -- that's -- is there anything else that you wanted to --

S I'm trying to think. I don't think so. The --

I I think that's it.

S I mean the last hundred years. I was only there for the last 20. But yeah, it's -- I'll never forget those university students. I was -- they honestly just would not believe me when I said, Things are going to change ten years from now. Things will change.

I When you're 22 years old... it's a little bit closer, right?

S Exactly. Exactly. So --

I Okay.

S All right?

I Thank you.

S Very good.

I That was very good. I'm not sure how we're going to do the history, but from a video perspective, we're --

(END OF INTERVIEW)