Teacher union oral histories necessarily reference many different individuals and organizations, which can make understanding their narratives a challenge for those unacquainted with the full historical context. To assist in reading for those newer to the subject, we have annotated the narrative with hyperlinks and footnotes that can provide quick reference information. Readers may also want to consult Rick Kahlenberg's biography of Al Shanker, *Tough Liberal*, which covers a number of the events discussed in Lorretta Johnson's oral history.

The annotations (hyperlinks and footnotes) in the transcript are the work and responsibility of Burnie Bond.

LC: Today is Tuesday, December 8, 2020. This is Leo Casey (in the transcript, LC). And with me is Burnie Bond (in the transcript, BB) and Vicki Thomas, and all of us are from the Albert Shanker Institute. We are here to do a Zoom interview with Lorretta Johnson (in the transcript, LJ), a longtime Baltimore Teachers Union and American Federation of Teachers leader, who has just recently entered into a well-deserved retirement. And so Lorretta, why don't we start with you telling us a little bit about your family, your parents, your brothers and sisters. And what was their influence on you as you grew up?

LJ: Well, I'm the baby of nine. And so, my sisters and brothers had a lot of influence on me. They were so much older than I. By the time I got out of school, all of my siblings were married, and I was just coming out of high school. My older sister was the one who actually looked after me the most, more than my mom. We were very close. It was like I was like an only child, because everybody was so much older. When I came along, my father made really good money. He was a longshoreman. And so, when you hear me talk, I talk about how wonderful my childhood was. But if you listen to my sisters, they would talk about the difficulties and the things they had to do to earn money, like selling newspapers and other jobs. You would think that it was two different stories and two different lives. There were nine of us and we were a very close family.

LJ: My oldest brother actually didn't live with us. He lived in my mother's hometown with his other grandmother. My eldest brother had same mother as the rest of us, but a different father. But I knew no difference and we were all close. I had a very good childhood. My father died when I was 14 and, of

course, my mother was a homebody. She had no job. She never worked. My father, Joe Clair, was from the old school: wives stayed home, and the guys went to work. And so, I had a very good family life.

LJ: My mother was very strong on education. She was determined that I was going to finish high school and go to college, even though my father died when I was 14. I did finish high school on time. And I did start college. I went to University of Maryland for six months, but I thought of all the pressure it was putting on my mother. She was getting my father's pension, but it just was too much. So, I came home.

LJ: I met the love of my life, Leonard Johnson, when I was 12. We were together the whole time. When I came home, he asked me to marry him. And so, I got married when I was just turning 18. I came out of high school at almost 16 and a half. I was in an accelerated class, and so I came out young. So, I graduated in 1956 and got married in 1957, after my six months at the University of Maryland. I got married and started having kids.

LJ: I went looking for a job only because I wanted a car. My husband worked; he had a good job. He was a pipe fitter. And things seemed to be going very well for me. I was a married woman, and we already had one or two children. We later decided to have my third son. But my life was pretty good. I started tutoring at my youngest son's school, Grove Park Elementary School, when he was in kindergarten. I was tutoring and the principal put me in alarm. He started assigning me classes, just like I was a teacher on staff.

LJ: And then in 1966, the teachers' union went out on strike and won collective bargaining rights. They bargained for 600 teachers' aides in Baltimore City. I put in for a job with Social Security while I was still tutoring in Grove Park. But the principal really wanted me to take a teacher's aide job at the school.

LJ: Social Security sent me a letter at home, saying that I was qualified for a GS-2 status. I would've made more money on entry, but I chose the teacher's aide position because I would be home at the same time as my kids. And I liked what I was doing with the tutoring and raising the kids. So, I became a

teacher's aide in Baltimore City schools in 1966. And in 1967, I got involved in the union when Godfrey Moore[1] came into the school.

LJ: I remember the first time Godfrey Moore came to recruit for the union. I came from a strong union family. My father was a longshoreman, but he was also a union rep.[2] So I knew about the union. But for some reason, I didn't like the way he was talking. So, I ignored him.

LJ: But then we had a big storm some time after Godfrey had come to try to get us to join the union. The principal promised us we would get paid for the day of the storm. The teachers were already on lunch break when central office called and closed the schools down. So, the aides were left to watch the kids. The para-professionals and teachers' assistants couldn't get out of the school when the teachers left at 11:00 a.m. Then the school system ruled that we were hourly employees, so because they closed school at 11:00, that's all they would pay us for.

LJ: That started my union career, because of the commitment from the principal who said we would get paid, but it never happened. I began to become the spokesperson for my para-professionals at the school I was assigned to work for, that is Mount Royal Elementary. So that was my union career.

LC: So, can we ask you a few more questions about your family? You grew up in Baltimore, right?

LJ: Yes, I was born and raised in Baltimore. I was born on 242 North Amity Street in West Baltimore. I wasn't a hospital baby; I was a home baby. My mother actually came from Churchton, Maryland. And my father came from Annapolis, Maryland.

LC: You said that your father was a union rep? Did you talk about that much at home? What the role entailed and why union involvement was important?

[1] Moore was then an AFT field representative for the Baltimore Teachers Union. He later became BTU president.

[2] At that time, the International Longshoremen's Association in Baltimore was segregated, so he was a union rep for Local 858, the African-American union. The ILA locals remained segregated until a court order forced their integration in 1971.

LJ: Well, we had a rule in our house. All of us who lived at home had to have dinner together. So, the conversation with my dad was always around life. He taught us all that we had to work. He taught us all that. He used to say, "God bless the child that has its own." He never wanted us to be dependent. And as much as he spoiled me, he made me obligated that I had to have a job and work for myself. So, my father and I used to have that conversation.

LJ: My father not only was a union guy, but he was also the captain in charge of assigning the men to their jobs. He had a gang. He led the gang. So, our conversation at the table a lot of times would be about how he assigned the guys. All married men got assigned first. At that time, the gang was 15 men that got assigned, with five substitutes.

LJ: I used to listen to my dad about how he didn't assign this one because he didn't come to work on time. And then he had to fight for him. The year that my dad died, he could have become the president of the union. They asked him to run, but he did not want to give up his position with his gang. He thought that was more important. My father was more educated than my mother. My father had two years of college. He went to Hampton University. And so, he moved up in the longshoreman union because he could read and write. He also helped a lot of the African American men who couldn't read and write. He did a lot of work with them and with their pay. I used to hear him talk about those things and how he wanted fairness.

LC: Obviously going to Hampton, which is an HBCU[3], is a formative experience for a lot of people. Did he talk about that at all?

LJ: Yes. My father wanted me to go to college. He didn't want me to give up. Two of my sisters had children before they were married. I was the last of his children. I was the baby, and he was determined that wasn't going to happen to me.

LJ: So, when I met Leonard, I had to sneak out to see him. I had to walk up and go see Leonard. When Leonard finally did call my house, my father hung up on him. My dad did not want me to have any boyfriends. When I went to dances, he gave me money for cab fare. I caught a cab up and cab back. He didn't

[3] Historically Black Colleges and Universities.

want any boys to bring me home. He was so overprotective. He wanted me to become his first college grad. My brother actually became his first college grad. This brother is three and a half years older. He went into the service, came out, and went to Morgan State University. He took accountancy courses and graduated to become an accountant.

LJ: I also have a sister who had a child before she got married. Then she went to work at Social Security and completed a community college degree. After, she became a supervisor at Social Security.

LJ: So his kids got degrees after his death, some of his older kids. I was the one who he wanted to get a degree, and, in the end, I earned a doctorate.

LC: So, were your parents family involved in a church and the community?

LJ: Yes, my mother was. My mother was very much about church and community. We went to church every Sunday. I was involved in the church community. If you didn't go to church on Sunday, you couldn't do anything. So, you had to go to Sunday school and then go to church. If you wanted to do other things, such as going to the movies on a Sunday, if you didn't go to church first, you couldn't do that. My mother was very, very close to the church, but my father wasn't. My father was a Democrat. He was a politician. And he was a little more outgoing than my mom. My mom was a Republican.

LC: What church did you attend?

LJ: When I married Leonard, I became a Catholic. In order to marry him, I had to convert to Catholicism. Before the wedding, I had to go to Catholic classes. And I promised that my children would be brought up in the Catholic faith. And they were.

BB: We missed which church you were going to when you were a child.

LJ: Saint Paul's Methodist Church.

LC: Was that an AME[4] church?

LJ: Yes, it was AME.

LC: Let's talk a little bit about your early education. What elementary school did you go to? Which high school? And were there any teachers that had a big influence on you?

LJ: I grew up as a tomboy. And then I met Mr. Bush. George P. Bush, who was a male teacher.[5] And he was determined to make a young lady out of me, which he did. I used to shoot marbles with the guys. And he'd come out in the yard to get me. He had me eat lunch with him. Mr. Bush, he kept me in his class. He got me in fourth grade, and he kept me until the sixth grade. I graduated from Phyllis Wheatley Elementary School 110 in 1948 or 1949, I believe. It was just right after my mother and father moved to the new house. We had a new home on Pulaski Street. But I stayed in Phyllis Wheatley Elementary down near Amity Street where I was born. And finished school there. But Mr. Bush was my first touch of civics.

LJ: On my graduation day, he and I did the census together. We knocked on doors and he taught me. He was my first civics instructor. He taught me what it meant to be a part of the community and work for the community.

LJ: He was married and had a set of twins. I used to babysit for him. It was funny; because I always used to ask him, "Mr. Bush, what does that P stand for?" And he told me, "Power." The power he needed to change me; but it was actually Paul. And as I grew in the labor movement, Mr. Bush became a principal. And before he passed, he and I met, and he talked about how proud of me he was. He saw me as a union leader on television and saw all the stuff I was doing with the Baltimore Teachers Union while he was a principal.

LJ: That was the teacher who carried me across.

[4] The African Methodist Episcopal Church is a predominantly Black Methodist denomination, established first by the Free African Society which Richard Allen, Absalom Jones, and others established in Philadelphia in 1787. The AME Church originated as a protest against the racial discrimination experienced by people of African descent in white Methodist congregations.

[5] Lorretta Johnson writes of her experiences with George Bush in this essay.

LC: And what high school did you go to?

LJ: I went to a junior high school first, which was called Booker T. Washington Junior High. And then I went to the best at that time. It was a Black high school, called Frederick Douglass High School. This was a school that was just for general academic education; all of the doctors and lawyers and African American elite went to that school. I graduated in 1956. I was in the band. I played music. Douglass High School had the best band in the state.

LJ: Actually, I got a music scholarship for the six months I was at the University of Maryland. So, my education was great. I came out of a school that produced all kinds of stars and lawyers and doctors. We were the last graduating class of 1,000 or more. That was high school.

BB: If that was a Black school, that means that Baltimore was segregated at that time.

LJ: Baltimore was segregated up until 1954. That was when the laws changed. But a lot of the Black kids didn't change to the white schools.

LJ: In fact, I could have gone to an all-girls white school. I had the grades for Western, which was a top all-girls school. I could have gone down there, but I didn't. I stayed at Douglass. I chose to stay. And that happened a lot with some of the Black kids.

LJ: In 1954, the Brown v. Board of Education decision came out. And a bunch of us had the grades and test scores to go to the white schools but didn't choose to go. I was one of those. I could have gone, but I'm glad I didn't. Because the experience I had with the teachers in high school taught us about civics and life, in addition to other academic subjects.

LJ: We had an English teacher, I can't remember her name, who forced all of our young men to wear a tie. They all had to wear a tie to class. Even if they had on a t-shirt, they still had to have on a tie. She taught them how to dress. You couldn't come in her class unless you had a tie on. So, we used to steal the

boys' ties and sell them back to them. Because if you're going to her class, you had to have a tie.

BB: When did you get accelerated in school?

LJ: In elementary school. I skipped third grade and went to Mr. Bush for fourth grade. Then my father took me out of the program. It was too much. You learned everything in six months, and then you were moved to the next grade. And my father felt that was too much pressure, so he took me out of it. But I did skip the one grade. Then I went to Mr. Bush and I wasn't in that program anymore. That was why I graduated high school at 16 and a half, close to 17. I really wasn't ready to come out of high school. I was kind of lost.

LC: So just so we don't forget it, what instrument did you play in the band?

LJ: The clarinet. And I got the first seat the year that I graduated. I was in the second seat for most of the time, and then I went up to the first seat. And I had two wonderful music teachers who worked with me. And what was so great about my music is that I wasn't actually a music student.

LJ: So I gave up all my athletic classes. And I gave up free time to be in the music program. So, I was considered a special student. I was in classes with Nancy Wilson's pianist, you know the singer. Also Carlos Johnson, a saxophone player who became very popular here in Maryland; he was in my class.

LJ: But I was no equal with them. I read music; I had to read music. But they made up music. We had the opera singer, June Jones, who came out of my class, who went on to become an opera star.

LJ: So music was the second thing I did at the school. I stayed in the academic program, but I was not in the music program. I did coach classes, stayed after school, and gave up my own time to be in music.

BB: Did you say that you had a scholarship in college for music?

LJ: Yes. I think it was $1,000 because of my clarinet playing. At that time, room and board at the university was about $600. So that was a lot of money at the time.

LC: So, would you say that your high school played an important role in helping their students develop a kind of positive image and positive consciousness about being Black?

LJ: Oh yes. Our teachers were very strong on that. They prepared us for what we were going to face. We knew racism. I knew racism. But I stayed in a community where, if you asked me, "Do you face racism?" I would tell you no, because I didn't go outside a certain circle. But if I went outside that circle, I could talk about racism. We were prepared for a lot of what was happening at that time.

LJ: For example, when we had all of the different African American males that were coming from college and speaking out, our teachers expressed that stuff to us. It wasn't just that we saw it on TV and in the paper. They talked to us about events.

LJ: We had civics teachers who really worked hard to teach us how African American students needed to handle themselves. Maybe it prepared us. It prepared me in a sense that I wasn't going to take it. I was militant. I sat on the picket lines. I went out and sat. As a mother, I got on a bus and went to DC, although I didn't really know why I was there. But I understood that I needed to join the protests. So, it set me up for the fight.

LC: So, as you said, while you're in high school, Brown v. Board of Education happened, and there was...

LJ: 1954. So, I only had two years of it. I came out in 1956.

LC: And then the Montgomery Bus Boycott was in 1956. So, could you talk a little bit about sort of how you see this developing civil rights movement and your kind of consciousness of it?

LJ: Yes. Because in Baltimore, there was a division between West and East. And we had this pastor who was at the Black Catholic school; he carried a basketball team right across from John Hopkins (University), where there was an eatery that he would protest about. And we'd go and join the protest.

LJ: We had a lot of Morgan State (University)[6] students that were protesting and sitting at the lunch counter. It's now a Rite Aid, but it used to be called Read's Drug Store and Pharmacists. And we also protested at the 10 cent store, which went out of business and became a Woolworth.

LJ: We used to go and sit down in those stores, and also go downtown and march around Macy's, which was then the May's Company. Our students also protested at The Head Company and Hustler's. As students, we would just go down and picket. Because you could go into the stores, but you couldn't try on anything. And if you tried it on, you had to buy it. And so, we'd go down to try to get stores to change. I wouldn't go in and buy anything from a store that wouldn't allow me to try something on if I so choose. And so, we did a lot of that.

LJ: I was conscious that in Baltimore City things started opening up for us, but in Annapolis and Anne Arundel County and Baltimore County, it was horrible. And so, you knew what part of town not to go in. But then we planned stuff. NAACP was very big in Baltimore, and they planned marches in these neighborhoods to open them up.[7]

LJ: I always gave the Jewish people a lot of credit. I belonged to a group that was called Blacks and Jews, and it was called BLEWS. And we worked together. They worked in the Black community. Some Blacks would have never even been able to buy a house or rent in Baltimore without our Jewish friends who rented to us.

LJ: And so it was an important relationship; a big partnership in Baltimore and in Maryland between Jews and African Americans. And they did a lot of civic work together, supporting Black legislators who were elected to the Maryland

[6] Morgan State University was founded as a private college in1867 but became a public institution in 1939. From the day it became public, Morgan's policy was to be open to students of all races. It is an HBCU.

[7] From 1986 until 2020, the national office of the NAACP was located in Baltimore.

state legislature. Verda Welcome, Clarence and Parren Mitchell, George Russell. All those guys were groomed through a coalition with Jews and African Americans working together.

BB: You talked about going down to Washington to protest. So, does that mean that you were at the 1963 March on Washington?

LJ: Yes. (State) Senator Douglass, who was A. Philip Randolph's coordinator, was taking people. He wasn't a senator then, but he was a politician. I think he was on the city council.

LJ: He arranged for buses from Baltimore. And I got on a bus. I didn't know what I was doing. I just got on there. And when I got to DC, I never got up to where the center of the protest was, since I had my oldest son with me. I stopped and sat on steps with other people. We talked. And I ended up getting back on the bus, going earlier because I couldn't manage much with my son with me. So, I just went back home.

LJ: But it was a wonderful experience to see us all gathered though together like that.

BB: How old was your son at the time?

LJ: That was '63. He was born in '57. So how many? 63. Five or six years.

LC: Lorretta, because of what Maryland is today, people don't tend to think of it as part of the South, but growing up...

LJ: But they should. They really should. Maryland is in the South. Cecil County and now Anne Arundel County, they're almost totally Republican. When Baltimore City had a bigger population, you could win the state with Baltimore City, part of Montgomery County and Prince George's County. If you had Baltimore City, you didn't have to win these other surrounding counties to win a governor's race. That's how we could get so many Democratic governors elected. But when you come right down to it, the Mason-Dixon line means something.

LC: You obviously grew up in an African American community in Baltimore. But did you experience segregation as you grew up?

LJ: Yes. When I went home with my father to Annapolis, I experienced it. In Baltimore City, if we walked into a store, we could go in the front door. But in Anne Arundel County, they had a side door that said "Colored." And even when the laws changed, the people who grew up there still did it, because it kept their life normal. And it got to the point where they knew we were from out of town, because we walked through the front door. They knew the kids who were raised down there wouldn't do it.

LJ: My first job, after I came back from college, was at Read's Drug Store. At that time, a high school diploma was almost like having a college degree. Yet I became a dishwasher, and not a stocker on the floor. And then what they would do was when African Americans came in to eat at the counter, they would send me out to wait on them. And I would ask them, "Look, why do you want to eat here?"

LJ: So the white waitress who didn't want to wait on them, but sent me, saw that the Blacks started leaving me big tips. And she wanted them and thought I should give them to her. And I said, "You didn't wait on them. You don't get it."

LJ: So yes, I knew about racism and I had touches of it. But I didn't come from the deep South. So, I didn't have those kinds of experiences, working in cotton fields and all that. No. My father was a longshoreman. And he made good money. I've always lived in a house. I've never had to live in the projects; I've never had any of that.

LC: The years I taught in Brooklyn, I taught in an African American community. And for the most part, the only white people my students might have interacted with were teachers and the police. And so, I was wondering if that was your experience growing up, if those...

LJ: Growing up, the teachers that I had were all African American. We didn't have many white teachers, because I didn't go into the white area. But the police in the neighborhood were white, and one of them was my father's friend. We

had community police who stayed in our neighborhoods, so we didn't have the experience of police beating up on Black neighborhood kids at that time. We did have some bad boys that came around. And when they came around, I guess the police might have beaten them. But the kids in the neighborhood didn't get beat up.

LJ: And then when we moved into our new house on a desegregated block. My father bought a house on Pulaski Street. And we were only the second Black family to move onto the block. So, then I was amongst white kids.

LC: How was your family greeted when you moved in?

LJ: Not well. We kept to ourselves. They didn't actually hit us or anything, but they didn't include us. They had the family who played ball at the corner. And they would come home on Friday and go into the bar, which was all white.

LJ: But we had a good experience at the Jewish store. Mr. Mince and Mrs. Mince; they became like family to us. My father had a store book, so I could go over and get anything I wanted. They would just write down what I bought, and my father pay at the end of the week. That's the relationship we had with Mr. and Mrs. Mince.

LJ: So I grew up doing what I wanted because I was the only child still at home. And then my father died when I was 14. My mother still had the home. We were still there, and she had enough from my father's pension to live off. So that's where I grew up at, in that block and in that home. So, I didn't know anything else.

LJ: I met Leonard when I was 12. His parents moved from the East Side to the West Side to the same neighborhood. And that was the start of it.

LC: Even though you grew up in a Black community, were there white peers that you interacted with and made friends with?

LJ: Yes. I had a married white girl friend who lived in back of me, and she and I did a lot together. And we were able to deal with things together. I mean, you still had a certain section of the city where she could go, and I couldn't. But

the two of us never went anyplace that we had to divide ourselves. When we knew that we couldn't enter together, we didn't go there.

BB: Just to clarify, was your teacher Mr. Bush Black?

LJ: Yes. Mr. Bush was Black. He was a young Black teacher.

LC: So, I guess you followed a path that a lot of para-professionals did in starting to work at the school where your own children went and then actually became a para-professional. How long did you work as a para-professional before you started working for the Baltimore Teachers Union?

LJ: Six years. I became a para in 1966. I say six years, but actually it was in 1970 that I negotiated the first contract for the para-professionals and the cleaning staff. So actually, it was only four years.

LC: Could you talk a little bit about the work that you did in the classroom?

LJ: I was a teacher's assistant. I was really trained by the teachers to actually be a teacher. And because I had my high school diploma and my diction was good, I had teachers who wrote lesson plans and gave them to me to read, and I would teach the class. I worked in first grade and second grade and pre-K.

LJ: I worked with a kindergarten teacher, Ms. Kerwin, who had owned her own pre-K school and came into the public schools. The school where I worked was one of those in the city that was funded by the federal government. We had a para in every classroom. And our class sizes were only about 20; so, they had money. This was one of those schools that they were trying to get all over the city. And I was in one of the very best schools.

LJ: Ms. Kerwin taught me how to be her. When she explained it to me, if she was absent, she didn't get a sub. I did the teaching, and she trained me to teach like her. So, I didn't just do an assistant's work. In fact, the year that the federal government came to see our school, Ms. Kerwin had to have surgery, and the principal allowed me to teach the class for the federal visitors. So, when they came in, they didn't know I was a para. They were calling me the teacher, but it was Ms. Kerwin. Actually, I used to always say that the teacher

was the diagnostician. Because once Ms. Kerwin's explained her lesson plans to me, I could implement them.

LJ: And if she watched me teach a lesson... If I did something wrong, Ms. Kerwin and I would stay after school. We'd stay and she'd point out the problem to me. She'd say, "Here's what you did wrong. Here's what you said, and here's the correct way to do it." So, she taught me well, and she didn't make me feel like I was beneath her, and I was on an equal status when it came down to it.

BB: Were you in the same school the entire time that you were in the classroom?

LJ: Yes. In fact, I spoke for the paras, urging that they all join the union. And when I left that school, I became the union rep.

LC: These are younger children, right? You would be involved in teaching them reading and writing and other things?

LJ: Yes. I had a teacher; her name was Ms. Hoot. She was a genius. She was only there because her husband was at John Hopkins Hospital. He was there to do his internship. And so, Ms. Hoot took a job teaching so she'd have something to do. The woman was brilliant, but she couldn't teach.

LJ: She wrote the best lesson plans and researched everything. She couldn't wait until I got to class. She'd be crying, trying to settle the kids and giving them candy. And they weren't paying her any attention. And then I'd walk into the room; I would tell John to sit down, and I'd move Jane away from John, and I would separate troublemakers from each other. And then she would say, "Oh Lorretta, I'm so glad you're here."

LJ: But she could write the most beautiful plans. Ms. Kerwin taught me well, so that I just had to follow her lesson plans. So, when you come right down to it, I saw that being smart didn't mean you were a good teacher. Ms. Hoot was brilliant, but she couldn't teach. And she knew she couldn't teach. And she couldn't wait until I had got there.

LC: So, one thing she's clearly missing is the rapport with the children, and...

LJ: Exactly. And classroom management, she couldn't do it. She could write a beautiful lesson plan and put it together instructionally, knowing at the end of the week what the kids were supposed to get out of that lesson. And if I taught it right, that's what I got.

LC: Somewhere in this process, you decide that you're going to finish your college education and go on to get a doctorate?

LJ: What I found during my years is that para-professionals could only be effective if they were supported. A lot of teachers didn't want paras, and some of them were right because they didn't train us. They just threw us into a teacher's classroom. So now the teachers had to teach the paras. I was a lucky para. I got teachers who were smart and really trained me, but not every para got that opportunity.

LJ: And so my thing was to find a way to get paras trained and support those who wanted to go on to become teachers. Because what we found when they passed the Title I law—so they put in a lot of the parents who had been working in schools as paras and gave them a six-week training—what we found was a lot of those people found a way to go back and get their education. They wanted to become teachers. They wanted to be part of education.

LJ: And so my total thing became: we have to have standards, like every other job. Teachers have standards. The social worker aides have standards, but there weren't any standards for the para-professionals.

LJ: So staff development became a big focus for me in negotiations. I was able to negotiate a para to teacher (career ladder) program. And so, in the '70s, I had paras that were going back to school. I was also working for AFT; Al Shanker was sending me all over the country. And I also was going to Coppin State University[8]. And then in 1975, I finished. I didn't go up on the stage with the graduates because I was out of town.

[8] Coppin State University is a public historically Black university located in the northwest section of the City of Baltimore.

LJ: Shanker was sending me all over to help organize paras. I put that first in my life. Actually, it became a symbol of what I wanted to do. I was grateful that I had a husband who worked with me on it. So that graduation day I think I was in South Carolina. I missed a lot of family gatherings with my siblings and with my own family because of the work I was doing for AFT.

LJ: And so to me, the only way this program was going to survive is that we had to get staff development and a focus on training. I would watch teachers go to workshops to start a new program, which would include a role for the paras. But the school system wouldn't give the paras that same staff development. They expected the teacher to come back and say, "Well, here's what you do." And teachers resented that because it meant that they had to train the kids but also the people who were supposed to assist them. So, if we were going to keep these programs alive, then we had to give teachers help. The teachers shouldn't be training us. The board should be setting up training for us. And when you looked at Title I, it had plenty money for training. Why they didn't use it, I couldn't understand.

LJ: That opened the door for me when I went around the country; I urged school boards to take that money to train paras. In New York, as you can see, the money that flowed from Title I gave the city a big para to teacher program. They used Title I money to achieve that.

LJ: I mean, they used to send that Title I back to the federal government. In Baltimore, they would call me up in like May and say, "Lorretta, we've got a million dollars to spend in training. What can we do? What can you do? How can you help me?" Because they were going to have to give that million dollars back to the Title I people if they didn't do some training.

LJ: So I was always prepared. I put a conference in my contract, put money in there for training, and release time for the paras to go back to school to get more training. That's really what became the center of my goal at AFT: standards. I did the standards piece. A lot of the paras didn't like it and said, "Oh, I don't need a high school diploma. I don't need this. I don't need that." I went out selling a program of staff development and of getting your high school diploma.

BB: Were you the first person to negotiate a para to teacher career ladder into a contract?

LJ: Yes.

LC: When you went back to complete your own education, basically what you studied was education?

LJ: Yes. I studied education. I didn't want anything else because that's where I was. And when Coppin State called me about the doctorate, I said that I couldn't do the doctorate in the time allotted. I was on the road too much. So, they made a special exemption and the governor went along with it. And they gave me a good education. My doctorate was in education, but I didn't complete the doctorate program fully. But I still was a REAL Doctor of Education. I've got a picture of me upstairs with the governor who pushed this. I didn't think Nancy Grasmick, the state superintendent of education then, would ever agree to that, but they did give me that doctorate. It was so astonishing for me. And if you see it, it doesn't say honorary. It's a regular doctorate.

LC: So, when you became involved in the union, were the para-professionals and the teachers in the same union? Or were they separate unions?

LJ: No. The para-professionals had no union. When I became involved with the paras, I took them into the AFT. The NEA wanted them, but they only wanted the paras, like myself, who had high school diplomas. They didn't want the Title I people. And what I saw right away is that this division in the ranks would kill us.

LJ: And so I united both the paras in Baltimore, both the federally and the locally funded people. I didn't talk to Shanker about this, but I knew it didn't matter how you get paid; you are still one unit. Because what they were doing is that, as the local money disappeared, you disappeared, and your seniority meant nothing. So, we made them one, which meant whether you were on local funds or federally funded, your seniority kept you working.

LJ: So it balanced itself. Title I was an exceptional program in 1968 when (President) Johnson signed it, because Title I provided a lot of training money. It also had a lot of rules and that forced school systems to do the right thing. That's why some districts in the South didn't take it right away, because they didn't want to do any of that stuff. So, the South refused to take the Title I money, but the East Coast and the Midwest took it and began to develop the para-professional program.

LJ: In fact, it was not yet para-professional. The term para-professional was invented by a professor in Minnesota. And I took it up and I said, "We've got to have a name that includes all of us." And then we just switched. After Velma Hill[9] left the UFT, I got control of the committee and campaigned to adopt the name para-professional.

LC: So that is what happened out of your experience of being cheated out of your pay on that snow day...

LJ: Oh, let me tell you that story. That was a wonderful thing. On that day, when Godfrey [Moore] came back, I told him I would work with the union and, of course, they voted me as their spokesperson. So, the next time around, we had a snow day and it was cold. And our principal asked us to take the kids out in the yard. And I said, "It's too cold out there." "Well, the kids need to get some air," he said. Blah, blah, blah, blah, blah. So, I said, "Okay." So, when we got out into the yard, I went across the street and called the school board. And I said, "I just passed my son's school and they have all of those kids out there in the cold. What is wrong with you all?" And before I could get back from the store where I made the phone call, the school bell ring for us to come in.

LJ: When I went in, I asked the principal what happened. So, he looked at me and said, "I don't know, somebody made a call to the school board and I didn't realize it was so cold out there." And I looked at him, I said, "I told you so." And he knew I had made that call. But we never did get paid for that snow day, but I blame that snow day for Lorretta Johnson's career.

[9] Velma Hill, a longtime civil rights activist, organized the New York City paraprofessionals for the UFT at the request of Al Shanker.

LJ: That snow day turned Lorretta Johnson into an activist. Although he did try to get us paid; months and months he kept putting it in, trying to get us paid, but he couldn't. The board took the position that, "That school closed at 11." And since we were hourly employees, they didn't have to pay us even if we stayed all day. They said it was volunteer time. So that created a Lorretta Johnson.

LC: So, you actually organized paraprofessionals in Baltimore. There was no union before you.

LJ: I did. First of all, the first thing I had to do, Leo, was to unify the unit. We were identified by how we were funded, federally funded or locally funded for example. When I was hired as a teacher's assistant, I had to take a test and they paid me $2.25 an hour. When the federally funded people were hired, they didn't have to take a test and they got less than the $2.25, but they did pay them for holidays. So, we had two classifications. I had to go out and convince the $2.25 people that they weren't better than the Title I people; and I had to convince the Title I people that, although they were paying you for holidays, it's still much less than $2.25 an hour. So, we were fighting each other when we should be fighting the boss.

LC: And what made you decide that you wanted to be part of the AFT?

LJ: Godfrey Moore was the first AFT rep who came to us. Dennis Crosby was the first Black president of the Baltimore Teachers Union, so he was a legend. The Jewish community was still part of the union, but Dennis became the first Black president just as I started becoming active. Then Godfrey Moore, the young buck coming up, wanted to really get the union started. He was on staff he told me that the NEA were snobs. They didn't want the federally funded paras. They only wanted the locally funded paras, because they thought we were better than the federally funded people. And that kicked me right out of there quick.

LJ: The other thing was when I looked at the constitution of the AFT, they did not have to change their constitution to bring us in. The NEA did. The AFT constitution gave us a right to vote at the very beginning. It wasn't something that had to happen later. That if you became a part of AFT, we each had one vote, and I thought that was wonderful.

LJ: So I started with the AFT and then I got to meet Al.[10] And Al had a conversation with me about paras and what he thought could happen over the years if the paras were organized. I mean, he had just had a fight in the UFT to organize the paras and had to threaten to resign if the teachers didn't take them in. But Baltimore was still his pick, so he started talking to me about organizing, because Baltimore wasn't going out organizing paras—I was. And he saw something in me I didn't see. And he continued to stroke me here and there, and tell me stuff to do and I just did it. And I didn't realize how much he wanted me to do. I only said 'no' to Al once. He wanted me to become the president of the BTU. When I got my degree, he didn't want me to stay as the chairperson of the paras. I said, "Al, I'm so identified with paras, every two years we'd be fighting over the presidency. Am I really a teacher? Am I para rep or this?" I said, "We don't need that. Let me find a teacher who will work with me and we can make them president." But he really wanted me to take that presidency.

BB: So, did you bring the teachers back into the AFT?

LJ: Yes. I brought the teachers back. You see we lost the teachers in 1973; we had an election and we lost the teachers. Then we had the strike. The strike was led by AFT, but we were not the teachers' bargaining agent, the NEA was. And so, both the NEA and the AFT got punished, because our law talks about the punishment. And I had to talk to the AFT, because AFT had given up on Baltimore. They didn't think we could get the teachers back. So, I did all the work. I used the paras to keep the teachers alive, and the paras, by the way, changed their dues from $50 to a $100, so that we could keep a staff person who would work for them. So, we fought for that and in 19... What is it 1978? We brought the teachers back. I negotiated such a good contract for the paras, telling the teachers what they could do, and then the paras would pull out their contract and say, "I don't have to do that. My contract says such and such." So, then the teachers ran back into AFT.

LC: So, BTU was originally an AFT local, right? But at some point, they become NEA. What was the cause of that?

[10] Johnson reflects on the history of organizing para-professionals in Baltimore in this essay.

LJ: Fighting, in-house fighting. Dennis Crosby and Godfrey Moore had an in-house fight. Godfrey Moore was the young buck, and we told Godfrey, "Dennis is a legend. Let it go. Don't run against him." But he got greedy and he ran against Dennis. But he became president of nothing; the election was in May of 1973, but we lost the election to the NEA just two weeks later. It was mostly due to all the in-house fighting, which all of the newspapers covered. Nobody expected it. All the teachers had been in the union, but we lost the election by 1,000 votes. Our teachers were just fed up with all the fighting between Godfrey and Dennis. So, Godfrey ended up president, but he was president of nothing.

LC: But it was actually your work that brought the BTU back into the AFT?

LJ: Yes. And many teachers wanted me to be president. There were a lot of teachers that... Especially the ones who had gone to school with me as paras and had become teachers, and so forth. So, I could probably have sustained that, but I had this commitment in my heart to the PSRPs, and I just couldn't let it go. It was my own commitment that I felt that they needed a leader and they needed someone who understood who they were, and I was the most outspoken. I was the most identified. I wasn't willing to start all over again and it didn't bother me to not hold the title.

LJ: See, I didn't have that ego that I had to be the boss, and a lot of people didn't understand that. It wasn't a big thing that a teacher ended up being the spokesperson for the union. If you're a leader, you're a leader. It doesn't matter whether you're a teacher or a para-professional, and this is what I told the paras, "In Baltimore we've got so much because we belong to the teachers' union. The paras have the same health benefits." In the surrounding counties, the para-professionals didn't have the same kind of health benefits that we had, because everything I negotiated for the teachers, I negotiated for them too.

LC: So, did you become the president of the BTU at a certain point?

LJ: I became the co-president when we decided that we were going to have two. When the teachers came back to the AFT, I was already serving as the BTU president. I had to be the president during the time when the teachers

weren't there. So when they came back, we set it up as co-; I became co-president of the teacher's union with John Bethea and any future teacher president that came on, we would be co-presidents.

LC: So, do you want to talk a little bit about what you were able to accomplish in the paras' collective bargaining agreements?

LJ: The first collective bargaining agreement; I remember that wholeheartedly. I got a nickel increase, but that wasn't important to me. What was important in our first contract in 1970 was the grievance procedure. Para-professionals had no due process rights around termination, and other things of that nature. And I was able to get strong, strong language around due process and giving them a right to grievances and to not be terminated without a hearing.

LJ: So that was a big thing for me in that contract. After that, the next thing was to get them in the pension program, the teacher's pension program. Paras had no program, and we had no way of setting up a pension program that would have helped them. So, I was able to get the state to put in language, amending the teacher's program and adding the para-professionals to it. Well, I made it optional at first, but the paras weren't joining. They weren't making a lot of money and to pay into the pension plan was a big takeaway for them. So, then I went and mandated it, and they were angry with me. "Why? Why?"

LJ: And I told them, "Because 20 years from now, you're going to thank me. Right now, you can be angry, but you have to go in. I gave you two years of optional." And then the next two years, I made it mandatory that they had to join the pension plan. And around 20 years later, they did thank me. So, it was a pension, health care... I mean, I built the contract for pension, health care, and all the other things that the teachers had in their contract were also added to the para contract.

LC: And at some point, you put something like a career ladder in that contract?

LJ: Yes, I put a career ladder in the para contract. You started with a high school diploma and then you added so many credits, and then you moved to another salary scale. All of that was... Career ladders were important to me because I

saw that as a continuation of staff development. Forcing them to go back to school, to get credits on their own... And I even put in the teachers' reimbursement; the paras had the same language as the teachers on tuition reimbursement. So, they could go back to college on their own and get 75% of the college paid for by the school system.

BB: Is that how you became a college graduate as well?

LJ: No, I got into the federal government's para to teacher program, where they paid for me. The government paid for me to go, but then I put language into the para contract. When the funds for the federal para to teacher program dried up[11], I put the tuition reimbursement into the para contract so that paras who wanted to go to school could still go. And then the big problem was that I got a lot of paras to go to school, right? But they couldn't get the degree because they couldn't afford to be off for the internship. So, then I wrote in language that they could continue to get paid as a para and do the internship, but at a different school. So that way they could get the certification to become teachers.

LC: So, the internship is where they would go as a student teacher?

LJ: Exactly. I was lucky. I did my student teaching at my school. I went through my student teaching internship at the same school where I had been assigned when I was working.

LC: In the course of this work, you meet Shanker. When was the first time you met Shanker? Do you remember?

LJ: Well, I didn't go to the Pittsburgh convention... I met Shanker at the 1972 convention. Because we had a convention every year then[12]. It used to be '70, '71, '72. I didn't go to the '70 convention. But the next year there was a big fight; that was when staff ran against someone and Shanker was upset.

[11] For more on the para-professional to teacher programs, see here and here.

[12] The AFT now holds its conventions every two years, with professional issues conferences in the off years.

LJ: That was in Pittsburgh. And then '71, I didn't go... We weren't seated, but '72 was when I first met Shanker.

LC: And so Shanker was already the AFT president when you meet him?

LJ: No, not yet.[13]

LC: Okay. So, what sort of impression did he make on you when you met him?

LJ: Oh, I was so in awe of Shanker. He was so brilliant. I used to watch Shanker in the executive council meetings. He would lean back in his chair and I tell you, the executive board members would run their mouths and go around and around and around the table talking, and Shanker sometimes didn't say a word. Then, at the end of the conversation, he would just pull all the discussion together. And then he'd say, "Here's where we're going to move." And it would flow out of him. And that's how it would go. We were so in awe of him and he was so well-read, and he was so fair. When he told me to put my petition in to become a vice president... I would have become a vice president in '77, but I said to Shanker, I said, "I can't run against Godfrey."

LJ: Godfrey was going to run, even though he was going to lose. I said, "I can't do it." So, I didn't put my petition in, but in '78 he said to me, "Put your petition in." He didn't ask me, he said, "Put it in." And I was working in the caucus and doing what I was supposed to do, and I was the membership chair, and I put my petition in. So, I became an AFT vice president in 1978 at the convention in DC. And the first thing he did was send me off to a racial conference in Israel.

LJ: The first conference I went to was a conference on race and diversity. And at that time, it was the beginning of the argument between the Palestinians who were born and raised in Israel, and they were going through the card system and stuff like that. And they would be teachers; he sent me to that first conference. I learned a lot... Shanker developed me into a leader. I learned a lot about being overseas and making decisions, not by what I saw on television and what I'm hearing, but by being in the environment and talking to the people. He made a different person out of me.

[13] Shanker was first elected President of the AFT at the 1974 convention.

BB: So that first overseas conference was in Israel?

LJ: Yes. It was in Israel. It was at a kosher hotel there. The name will come back to me, but I remember the guys with the curls[14]. I couldn't tell you who all was with me, but I remember that Herb Magidson[15] and his wife were there. And there were a couple more AFT people at that conference. That was my first time out of the country, that conference in Israel. And I remember being part of the conversation; there were round table discussions. And when we came back, we had to talk to Shanker about what we saw, and what we felt, and what were the changes we thought should happen, and stuff like that. You just didn't come back from those things... It was not a trip; it was always an education.

LC: As you said, you found it very hard to say 'no' to Shanker?

LJ: Very.

LC: And so, he then had you running around the country organizing paras everywhere, right?

LJ: That's right. It started with Chuck Richards[16], and before Chuck it was John Schmidt[17] (...in fact, John just passed away), who was also in the Organizing Department. And then Phil Kugler[18] came in. And well... I had to take Phil to the mountaintop, because I don't think Phil wanted to organize paras. So, we tricked him up to my suite at one of the conferences and I had the whole

[14] Johnson's reference is to the payot, a hairstyle typical of ultra-orthodox Hasidic Jewish men.

[15] A former vice president of the AFT for over 20 years, Magidson began union work as a high school chapter chairman in the UFT. In 1969, he moved on to become an assistant to the then UFT president, Albert Shanker. His union career has spanned officerships of the New York State United Teachers, the New York State AFL-CIO, and pension and health insurance plans servicing union members.

[16] Richards was a former AFT organizer and later assistant to then AFT president Al Shanker.

[17] Schmidt was another former AFT organizer.

[18] Kugler was the decades-long director of the AFT Organization and Field Services Department and assistant to the AFT president. For his career and organizing paras, see this essay.

team of paras in there. Phil always tells that story. He said I tricked him, but we got a lot of organizing work done though.

LJ: I mean, you know we got a lot done, despite the different AFT state federations that said it wasn't worth it. Wow, organizing para-professionals... First of all, they said that there were no leaders. I was treated as an exception. Loretta Johnson was the exception, because for some reason they felt that my getting teacher certification and all like that made me special. I told them, "There are plenty of para-professional leaders out here, but they have to be trained; and their leaders have to respect them and treat them like an important individual." I said, "You can find plenty of paras who are equal to Lorretta Johnson." And I had to sell that to the state fed presidents, because the fight inside the house here was, "Why should we organize them? They won't be around long." And Shanker allowed me to speak to that.

LJ: I remember when he used to come give his speeches to us at our conferences, he'd always ask me what I wanted him to say. I said, "I don't want you talking about teachers." And he'd go in his pack and pull out an envelope where he had written five or six points, and then he would talk for two hours. They loved it. The paras loved him. I loved him.

LJ: He was leader. He understood... In fact, when "A Nation at Risk"[19] came out, he sent us all a copy and he wrote on it, "I want you to read this." Shanker begin to shape education differently when "A Nation at Risk" came out. That's when he started talking about the idea of charter schools. That's when he began to look at the fact... I mean, he actually said to me, "At some point in your life, Lorretta, it might not be in my lifetime, the para is going to be the teacher and the teacher is going to be the students' diagnostician." He saw that, he saw that teachers should be diagnosing and working with the para. He saw that.

LJ: "A Nation At Risk" changed a lot for him. That's when he started talking to all the foundation trustees and got involved in these boards. And he set up that Standards Board [National Board for Professional Teaching Standards][20],

[19] "A Nation At Risk" was a 1983 report on the nation's schooling system, published during the administration of President Ronald Reagan. For a retrospective in it, see this essay.

[20] On the National Board, see this history.

because he saw that education was in for some problems, and they began to talk about "bad teachers." He knew that we do something to protect our profession, like doctors and lawyers do. That's how the Standards Board came alive. So, he was on a roll in those areas, and he saw the para-professional as a big key to that.

LC: Would you like to talk a little bit about other AFT leaders that you met during this time? Like Sandy Feldman?[21]

LJ: Oh, yes. Sandy and I grew to be great friends. Sandy was a duplication of Al, but Sandy had her own ideas of how things should be done. In fact, I tell you this as somewhat of a joke, she and I... When she met [her second husband] Arthur (Barnes), and she was still dating him, she didn't want to give up her weekends any longer. All the AFT executive board meetings were on Saturdays, Sundays, and Mondays, because we had two vice presidents who were still teaching. So, she wanted to change that. That's how we got to these Monday, Tuesday, and Wednesday meetings. And she and I used to laugh. I said, "All right." She said, "I'm going make waves. Are you going back me?"

LJ: But Sandy was similar to Al; she actually was a teacher. She also loved the para-professionals. She and I talked about it. In fact, she came to me when she became the AFT president. She didn't understand how the Para-professional PPC[22] [Program and Policy Council] worked so well, but the teacher PPC didn't. So one of the things she wanted me to do when she became president is go in and listen to the teacher PPC to see how she could change it in order to get it structured like the paras was.

LJ: And I told her, "Well, you see the difference is, for the paras, that's the only leadership they have." And they were very active coming from around the country and working in their state feds. So, they were very good with our PPC; and we set policy for the rest of the paras around the country. And they all brought a lot of stuff to the table.

[21] A memorial to Sandy Feldman can be read here.

[22] The Program and Policy Councils were established to develop policy and programs for each of the AFT's divisions – K-12 teachers, higher education, health care and state and local government.

LJ: Sandy and I, we were on the AFT executive council together. We went on tour together. In fact, we went to South Africa together. We went on a safari that was in addition to the trip that the rest were doing. We just got together, 13 of us and went off on safari together. Sandy and Rachelle Horowitz[23] and Eugenia Kemble,[24] all of them took me under their wing when I was sitting on the council. I'd go to dinner with them, they would talk to me about my expectations, the things that I wanted to see happen. They just worked with me: Eugenia, Rachelle, and Sandy.

LJ: And then Randi [Weingarten] came on.[25] She and I used to talk a lot. And I think that was because of Sandy, because Sandy had talked to her about me. They both had a lot of influence. Then we had Nat LaCour,[26] who I met in 1972. I went down to New Orleans to help him organize his para chapter and we got to be friends. I would take my kids down to spend holidays with him in the early years. It was Nat and a lot of the African American staff who worked us would along, Sol Smith[27] and quite a number. Barry Simons. A number of them touched me.

LJ: Chuck Richards helped me with negotiations. Bob Bates,[28] who was probably the best negotiator I've ever met, worked with me so I learned to negotiate. Ann Lepse, she and I got to be sisters. She was on staff at the Philadelphia local, and then became staff at the Pennsylvania state federation. And there were so many people over the years who helped me and that touched my life. And each time they moved me up; I never asked for anything that I got. Somebody always recommended me and moved me, and I just accepted it. I

[23] Rachelle Horowitz is a former, longtime AFT political director who gained fame for her role as the transportation director for the 1963 March on Washington. On her role in the March, see this video.

[24] Eugenia Kemble was the founding executive director of the Albert Shanker Institute and longtime assistant to then AFT president Albert Shanker.

[25] Johnson's relationship with Weingarten would have begun while Weingarten was the President of New York City's United Federation of Teachers, and both were members of the AFT Executive Council. As Johnson notes below, when Weingarten became AFT President, she asked Johnson to run on her slate as an AFT officer.

[26] Nathanial "Nat" LaCour was AFT Secretary-Treasurer and, before that, a longtime president of the United Teachers of New Orleans, an AFT affiliate.

[27] Smith was an AFT organizer and later Western AFT regional director, now retired.

[28] Bates is a former AFT organizer.

never did it because I thought I was going to get something. I did what I did because I thought it was the right thing to do and I believed in the people of the PSRP [Para-Professionals and School-Related Personnel].

LC: It's touching to hear you give credit to all these people. A lot of people give a lot of credit to themselves, but not to people who helped them.

LJ: AFT groomed me, and these people touched my life. I didn't know any of that stuff. I have to give credit to them. You just don't become who you are by yourself. And I never felt that way. The same way with the paras who voted for me, they did so much for me. They did not have to treat me the way they did, but they did. And I give them credit for making me a national leader. Even when I wasn't home, I never lost an election. Nobody ever ran against me. Actually, one person ran against me, and then the girls give him such a fit he withdrew. I mean, I didn't do that. These were people who believed in me and I certainly couldn't do it without them. They made me a leader.

LJ: I remember when I first got to be their leader. Well, there was a bunch of us; we used to go out and joke, laugh and talk. And then I started getting left out of the conversations, so I felt bad. I kept saying to them, I said, "Well hold up a minute. Why y'all ain't telling me none of the jokes? Why am I left out?" And you know what they said? "You're the leader now, you can't be with us." They did it. They had to tell me I was the leader and that I had to be different and stand out. So, I didn't know any other way to explain me, except the people who believed in me made me who I am. Starting with Shanker, who was number one.

LC: So, one thing you did in Baltimore, and then in Maryland, is build a political powerhouse where the BTU and the Maryland Federation of Teachers are major political players in the world of politics.

LJ: I found out in my organizing that getting out there and striking wasn't going to be the way to do it. So, I realized I had to be political. So, if you're political, you've got to produce. And I remember I started with t-shirts. I bought 50 yellow t-shirts for the Baltimore mayoral election. And I'll never forget it,

because Foster Stringer[29] came in and he kept saying, "Well, wear this and wear that." I said, "Just go to the paras. Right now, you're not good with the teachers. Phone banks and all of that, the paras will take care of it." And he did it.

LJ: So on election day, I put 50 people out there with yellow t-shirts on. The next day when our candidate won, newspapers gave us such great notice. Mary Pat Clarke[30] and all of them. They said that the Baltimore Teachers Union put 500 people on the street, but I only had 50 t-shirts. Where did 500 people come from? That's what the newspaper said. And that's it. So, anybody who had on a yellow t-shirt was considered to be a teacher. And from then on, with the endorsement process and everything, if you didn't come through BTU, they didn't think that you could win. And I was the person to talk to. I remember Kweisi Mfume.[31] Kweisi was our candidate and we helped elect him to the city council. And when he ran for the seventh district representative, Wendell Phillips[32] also ran.

LJ: Well Phillips was the legislator who I got to give us agency fee.[33] I got the governor to sign it, but Phillips put it in for us. So, we owed him. So, when Kweisi jumped into the campaign, he came in late. We had already done an early endorsement for Phillips. And Kweisi said to me, "Well, I didn't like the way you endorsed in Maryland, blah, blah, blah." So, I said, "You want me to be honest with you, Kweisi?" I said, "Even if we had not done an early endorsement, you would not have gotten the endorsement." "What do you mean? I'm the teacher candidate?" he said. I told him, "We owed Phillips, and he would have still have gotten that endorsement."

[29] Stringer was the AFT deputy political director and later director of the AFT Human Rights and Community Relations Department, now retired.

[30] Clarke was a representative on the Baltimore City Council, its president for a time and a candidate for mayor.

[31] Mfume was the U.S. Representative from Baltimore from 1987 to 1996, stepping down to become the President of the NAACP. After the death of his successor, Elijah Cummings, Mfume ran for his old seat in 2020 and was re-elected.

[32] Phillips was a member of the Maryland House of Delegates. On Phillips' dual role as pastor and political leader, see this article.

[33] 'Agency fee' was the practice of having non-members of the union pay a fee, smaller than the dues that members paid, for the services provided to them by the union, such as collective bargaining. In a 2018 ruling in Janus v. AFSCME, the Supreme Court prohibited agency fees in a decision widely understood to be an attempt to hobble public sector unions.

LJ: And Kweisi couldn't be mad at me. I told him the truth. And so, when he won over Phillips, he and I became dearest friends, because I was honest with him. Had I tried to bull job him and told him, "Well if you had come in earlier..." But I said, "Even if we hadn't done an early endorsement, you wouldn't have gotten it." Kweisi talks about that story all the time, because I was always honest with him.

LJ: And so all of the candidates came to BTU. We endorsed, they won. If we didn't endorse somebody, I stood my ground. I did not endorse [Martin] O'Malley[34] as the mayor, and every other union endorsed [Lawrence] Bell.[35] And after O'Malley won, Ernie Greco[36] called me up and said, "When are we going to go to meet and go down and meet with O'Malley and try to bridge something for the unions?" I said, "Y'all go ahead." I said, "He's going to need me. I'm going down there as an equal. I'm not going down there on my hands and knees, because with education, we need too much." And so, he did need me, and he called me. And when he called, I went down, and we met. And we talked about what he needed from me and what I needed from him. And he and I became great friends. He called me up a couple of months ago and said, "This is your long-lost son, Martin O'Malley." In 2007, he became the governor of Maryland.

LJ: Being honest with the candidates, and standing your ground on equal footing gives you the best stance. And so, in Baltimore City and Baltimore County, the bond with the teachers union and the state became vivid. With the MSEA [Maryland State Education Association],[37] they gave candidates money; we gave them people. The paras worked hard; teachers didn't. It wasn't the teachers who were on the committees, it was the paras. They did it. But they did it in the teachers' name. They didn't go out and say, "I'm a para." We just

[34] O'Malley was the mayor of Baltimore and a two-term governor of Maryland. In 2016, he ran for the Democratic nomination for U.S. President, but did poorly in what became a two person race between Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders.

[35] Bell was the president of the Baltimore City Council. On the dynamics of the Bell-O'Malley race for Mayor, see this article.

[36] Greco was the president of the Baltimore Metropolitan AFL-CIO.

[37] MSEA is the state affiliate of National Education Association and is a larger organization than the Maryland Federation of Teachers, the AFT affiliate to which the BTU belongs.

used the term teachers union. They were asked, "Are you from the teacher's union?" "Yep."

LJ: They did phone banking. They did all the precinct walks and everything, and they wore those yellow t-shirts. Yellow t-shirts, that had everybody starting to have a t-shirt in Baltimore. But it was those yellow t-shirts that started our rise to the championship of candidates. And candidates still call me right now for my endorsement. Howard County's Calvin Ball;[38] I don't vote in Howard County, but they just wanted to use my name, saying that they had talked to me and I'm with them. It's incredible. I say to them, "Look, I don't even live in the city anymore; I live in Baltimore County." Then they say, "But Lorretta, your name will go a long way... So, is it okay if I tell them I talked to you?" I say, "Fine with me." But if there is somebody who is not fine, I tell them no.

LJ: But that's how you build a relationship. O'Malley, when we were in trouble and Governor [Bob] Ehrlich[39] wanted to take over Baltimore City Public Schools, I had to convince O'Malley to go to his rainy day fund and loan the school system $58 million, and told him how to get it back. And I was able to do that. Ehrlich didn't like him anyway and they were always fussing, and I used the ego. I said, "You can let him talk to you like that!" And he said, "No." I said, "You can get the school system solvent; take your money off the top of next year's budget—but don't let Ehrlich take over our school system." And O'Malley did it.[40] I mean, there's a lot more stories behind it, but it all was because we were honest with one another.

LJ: Kurt Schmoke,[41] our former mayor was the education mayor. His people would be scared of me going down to talk to him by himself, because he'd give me anything. And then he'd have to call up and say, "Lorretta, can I back

[38] Ball is current Howard County Executive.

[39] Elrich was Republican governor of Maryland from 2003 to 2007, during the period that O'Malley was the mayor of Baltimore.

[40] In 2006, O'Malley – with the support of Johnson and BTU – would defeat Elrich when he ran for re-election as governor.

[41] The first elected African-American mayor of Baltimore, who was succeeded by Martin O'Malley.

out of that, because my people will give me a fit. I shouldn't have told you that you could have that." And I'd say, "Okay."

LC: Did you have a relationship with Elijah Cummings?[42]

LJ: Oh, a wonderful relationship. In fact, Elijah gave me my award and he bought out stuff that I did that I didn't even know that the legislators knew about. And he talked about that. I had a very great relationship with Elijah.

LJ: And I got an economic award from the Baltimore County delegates about a year ago. Delores Kelley, a state senator; she and I always fought, because she wasn't good with education. But she nominated me for this economic labor award, and I didn't know what it was about. So, when I went to get the award, she introduced me. And when she talked, I had never even looked at it this way, but this is what she said. "Here's a woman that helped women who would have probably been on welfare, but made it economically sound so that they could run their own homes." And that's where I got the economic part of it. Because some of the paras might've ended up on welfare but ended up being able to take care of their families. They made enough money; some of them even bought their own homes. That's what she was talking about, but I had never even looked at it that way. So, you get to hear what people say about you through some of these awards.

LJ: Barbara Mikulski[43] and I grew up together. I remember knocking on doors for her when she was a social worker and was running for city council in Baltimore. She never forgot it.

LJ: And one of her [Mikulski's] disciples just retired, I saw it on Facebook, after about 40 years. She ran against Kurt Schmoke for mayor and lost.[44] She was the president of the city council, but she lost against Kurt Schmoke. And she was really bitter about it because she was strong liberal, and the African American community always voted for her. But when she went against Kurt,

[42] Elijah Cummings was a politician and civil rights advocate who served in the U.S. House of Representatives from Maryland from 1996 until his death in 2019.

[43] Mikulski was a five term United States Senator from Maryland. With her combined time in the House and Senate, she was the longest serving woman member in the history of the U.S. Congress.

[44] Johnson is referring to Mary Pat Clark, referenced above on page 31.

they voted for Kurt, and it kind of hurt her. So, she stayed off the council for about five or six years, but then she came back. She's on the city council now, but she just retired for the second time.

LJ: And then you've got Maggie [McIntosh], who's still down in the legislature and who came out of Barbara Mikulski's office. And [Ann] Lewis,[45] who is high up in the Democratic Party. All of those girls were with me in Baltimore in their early years. And we would go down to the Jewish circuit, kiss the babies, and get the vote out. That was what we did.

BB: Did you have a relationship with Paul Sarbanes?[46]

LJ: Yep. Paul Sarbanes, Ben Cardin,[47] all of those guys were coming up. Sarbanes just passed a few days ago. And his son, John, took his old seat in the U.S. House of Representatives. And then he has another son [Michael] who is a community activist [and now the director of partnerships, communications and community engagement for the Baltimore City Schools]. So those are Sarbanes's two boys.[48]

BB: Did you have a relationship with some of the older Black AFT leaders like Dick Parrish and Layle Lane?[49]

LJ: They were leaving when I came in. Layle Lane and a lot of them were leaving the executive board. So, I never had a relationship with them, but I knew about their legacies and the work that they did.

BB: What did you make of the different factions on the left in the union?

[45] Lewis, who served as Mikulski's campaign manager, is a long-time senior Democratic Party operative and official. She is the older sister of former Congressman Barney Frank.

[46] Sarbanes was a five term Democratic member of the U.S. Senate from Maryland.

[47] Cardin is one of the current United States Senators from Maryland.

[48] Sarbanes also had a daughter, Janet Sarbanes, an author and professor of creative writing at the California Institute of the Arts.

[49] On the work of Layle Lane, see this essay; on the work of Dick Parrish, read this entry.

LJ: We had a faction, the Black Caucus, who was controlled by the Berkeley people in California. And instead of dealing with Black issues, they spent the whole time fighting with Shanker over policies and issues. The big issue during those years was the secret ballot and the open ballot. The Black Caucus always fought for the secret ballot, which I didn't understand. I'd go to their meetings, and I said, "First of all, you wouldn't have any Blacks on this council if you had a secret ballot. So, I don't know why you're fighting for a secret ballot." Bill Simons[50] and I argued over that point. I said, "There's no way for you to get on this council or run under that secret ballot. I said, "When we go to the convention, we're not there on our own; we're they're representing our locals. And our locals have a right to know how we voted at the convention." I said, "I'm not against secret ballot, but what you are calling a secret ballot, can't really be a secret ballot."

LJ: Those were the really big issues. The Berkeley group was very radical, as you well know. I was not into any of those issues, but they spent most of our convention time running Shanker down. They called Shanker racist and everything that came out of his mouth was this thing and the other thing. And I decided—well me, Nat LaCour and the people from Detroit—that we were going to go into the Black Caucus and make them deal with the real issues, like the problems that were happening in Black schools. How do we get more funding for Black kids? These were issues that should have been taken up, but those people weren't interested in that; they were only interested in attacking Shanker. And I said, "If you had something to attack Shanker that was true, then we should be putting it to him, not trying to embarrass the union." And so we went in and actually began to work with the Black Caucus, and got it to move away from those radical issues that were happening in California and in Berkeley, but weren't happening all across the country.

LJ: Shanker and I used to talk about race. For example, if you remember the decision that came down around Boston on seniority, and Shanker... it wasn't about race; it really was about seniority. Black parents wanted the white teachers out of their schools. And Shanker said, "That's fine, but you've got to use the seniority system." That's how the Ocean Hill-Brownsville[51] thing

[50] Simons was the long time president of the Washington Teachers Union, and an opponent of Shanker in the AFT.

[51] Johnson is referring the 1968 Ocean-Hill Brownsville strike in New York City. On that strike, see this essay.

happened. Well, it happened again in the early eighties, with the Boston teachers. Black parents wanted the white teachers out of the schools because they felt that they weren't teaching the Black kids well.

LJ: But it was also about the contract. I spoke up for seniority because the reverse would have happened in Baltimore. Teachers in Baltimore were almost all Black. So, if the white parents didn't want the Black teachers to teach their children, we were going to use seniority, right? So, what difference does it make? If you are talking about the contract and using the contract and not the issue of race against race, then you have to go with what you negotiated. And we had negotiated seniority as part of the process of teachers being transferred or moved from school to school.

BB: Do you think the hostility to Shanker was because of Ocean Hill-Brownsville?[52]

LJ: Oh yes. Most definitely. Although before he passed, he did end up making up with the parents. And I think people really looked at that differently, those who wanted to. But some people wanted to see it as racism, because that's the way it was written up originally. I mean, Barbara Van Blake[53] and I fought it. When we went out there in the civil rights community, we had to fight that issue. When we start talking about the AFT, people would say "Oh, well Shanker is a racist." I said, "Where did you get that from?" That history around Ocean Hill-Brownsville, we fought that and changed it. I said, "We wouldn't be out here working on social justice issues with the civil rights movement if Shanker was such a racist. He wouldn't care about that." Barbara Van Blake and I fought that impression. There were some times I wasn't with her, but she was a tough person. She fought the Black community tooth and nail over that issue.

LC: And some people inside the union, like Bill Simons, showed a lot of antipathy toward Shanker. His opposition came out of Ocean Hill-Brownsville too.

LJ: Right. And the secret ballot. And if you look at Bill Simons' local, everybody that came up after him had the same problem. That local stayed in trouble for

[52] See footnote above.

[53] Van Blake was the director of the AFT Human Rights and Community Relations Department. See the tribute to Van Blake in the *Congressional Record*.

almost 20, 30 years after Bill was gone. Because the people that he bred and the way that he trained them were all... Bill and I fussed all the time about that. I mean, Bill Simons was a part of Bill Lucy's CBTU [Coalition of Black Trade Unionists] because the A. Phillip Randolph Institute didn't endorse candidates.[54] But they wanted to be able to endorse Black candidates, which I didn't have a problem with. But it was a big problem in the labor movement. When Black candidates were running, they couldn't get money out of the AFL-CIO or get endorsements and things like that. So, we, who were on a national level working with our national unions, were trying to find a way to do that. So CBTU was born. Bill Lucy put all the money up for it because, at the time, he was the secretary treasurer of AFSCME [American Federation of State, County and Municipal Employees]. But we never belonged. AFT didn't do a lot with CBTU in the 70's. We continued to work with APRI.

BB: I was going to talk about your leadership of the AFT civil and human rights committee and your relationship with Barbara Van Blake.

LJ: Oh, I learned so much from Barbara. Barbara changed the whole labor movement around Shanker. She did a lot out there, working with all the unions. All the unions had the same problem and they had racism within their own ranks. Barbara was one of the few Blacks that had money to do civil rights work. Shanker, gave her department money to do stuff. And she helped other unions. They couldn't do much, but they could spread the word. Barbara did all that work. In fact, she started the labor round table with NAACP, Urban League, all of those folks. I remember when Hugh Price was head of the Urban League and Shanker was talking about standards in education. And Black folks were not against standards, but because schools couldn't get the money, the books and all of the things that they needed for students to succeed, setting standards without that caused the community to be out there arguing against them. So Barbara and I had to convince Al to meet with the Urban League president, the NAACP President, and all of the Black organizations. He had a wonderful meeting.

[54] On the history of the formation of the CBTU, read their account. The APRI was founded as the first racial group affiliated with the AFL-CIO through the efforts of A. Philip Randolph. Bayard Rustin served as its first executive director.

LJ: He thought he was going to have to fight over standards. And they told him the same thing we told him. That if he did go out for raising standards, that he had to verify that the African American schools were provided the books, the technology and all of the things that they needed. If they could raise standards, nobody would be against it and it could make a big difference. So, getting him to sit down and talk to them one-on-one was the best thing we could have done. And Barbara was the kind of person that they could go through. She had so much respect, because of what she did to help the unions who couldn't afford to be out there.

LJ: Our civil and human rights conferences became a centerpiece in the AFT. And we would have more of the other unions wanting to attend than our own members. I remember arguing with Barbara because I was trying to get our white locals to our civil rights conferences. What the white locals would do was send all the Blacks in their union to the civil rights conference, but the message needed to get to our white members too. As much as we came together to talk about what the problem was, we could talk to each other all day about African American issues, the Native American issues, the Latino issues.

LJ: Latinos talked to the Latinos; Blacks talked to Blacks; but we were missing white members in that conversation. And so, we used to have to do a lot of work to get them there. And of course, New York always sent a good cross-section of their membership. Al and Sandy always had white folks there. But we had to get Boston. Baltimore would send a lot of the whites who were active, but most teachers were Black. Cleveland was the same way. So, we had to find ways of how we would work it up to get as many of our white counterparts to the civil and human rights meetings. And we're still working on that.

LC: So, you've talked a little bit about The A. Philip Randolph Institute. So, let's talk some more about that. Did you meet and know Bayard Rustin?[55]

[55] A legendary organizer of the civil rights movement who played the essential role in introducing Martin Luther King to non-violent direct action, Rustin had a particularly close relationship with the AFT. For more on his life's work, see this essay.

LJ: Yes. I met that Bayard and I met Asa [A. Philip Randolph][56] before he died. In fact, we had a wonderful meeting with Asa talking about his very beginning in labor and everything else. Barbara really introduced me to the A. Philip Randolph Institute. I became APRI president in Baltimore because of her, but Al housed the national office of the A. Philip Randolph Institute in New York City for years, and he served as the Secretary-Treasurer of APRI. AFT funded a lot of A. Philip Randolph programs. And Bayard it did a lot of work with Al. In fact, he and Barbara went to East Africa on an AFT route. So, Bayard with very close to Al and so was Rachelle Horowitz, all of them, they were all very great friends. And APRI was actually housed in the UFT headquarters for years, until they came to DC.

BB: Did you know that Bayard Rustin is the one who recommended Barbara Van Blake to Shanker?

LJ: Yes. Barbara did a lot of work in Duval County [Florida]. Now you talked about Baltimore's powerhouse in elections; Barbara Van Blake ran the elections in Duval County. She was a math teacher, and she was president of the A. Philip Randolph Institute in Duval. She got the community so involved. And she was beginning to get more Blacks elected to the state legislature and to school boards, and the Duval Teachers Union was getting stronger and stronger. And she did a lot of work. And Bayard did recommend her when Al wanted to set up the civil rights department, he recommended Barbara as the director.

LC: What was your impression of Bayard?

LJ: Bayard used to amaze me because he was so outspoken. Very outspoken. He didn't want no stuff and didn't take no stuff. He cussed a lot, but he was so brilliant. He knew how to get what needed to be done for the A. Philip Randolph Institute. He did a lot of work with Asa, and in those late years, with the AFL-CIO. People don't realize this, but the money that the AFL-CIO gives to the constituency groups actually belongs to APRI. Asa got them to pass a 3% dues set aside and later 10% to fund the APRI. And then, as new constituency groups were formed, they took money away from A. Phillip Randolph Institute and divided it up among the new constituency groups. But actually, the

[56] A preeminent civil rights and labor leader, Randolph was the President of the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters and the leading African-American in the American labor movement. For more on his work, see this essay.

amendment in the AFL-CIO constitution was for the full amount to come to APRI.

LJ: There was a big fight then, it's almost some of the same stuff that's going now. The fight was over trying to get more support for the African American community. And when we do get Black people to run for office, we need to get them associated with labor and get money to them. That was a big fight. As I said, that's why the Coalition of Black Trade Unionists got formed. Because we had people running for office that a white-dominated AFL-CIO wouldn't give a cent to. Wouldn't endorse them. Wouldn't give them any money, but yet they were strong unionists. They came out of the unions, but they couldn't get anything out of them.

LJ: It was a big fight all the time. How do we get to our politicians? That was a big fight. Bill Lucy was out there. He had a fight with his president, trying to get the AFL-CIO to work with the state and local Central Labor Councils. You've got CLC's right now that won't endorse a Black candidate. We're still fighting some of the same problems.

LC: So at a certain point, Norm Hill[57] takes over the leadership of the A. Philip Randolph Institute. He's the husband of Velma Hill, who had organized the para-professionals in New York.

LC: What was your impression of Norm and Velma?

LJ: Norm and Velma paid their dues. They were activists in CORE (Congress of Racial Equality). Actually, they believed in the CORE system, where whites and Blacks worked together. A lot of the Blacks in the AFT used to call them handkerchief heads, because Velma spoke up for Al all the time. I used to say to most of the Blacks that I knew, who said that to me, I said, "She paid her dues." She was attacked when they integrated that beach in Chicago.[58] The limp that she has was because of being hit by a rock that was thrown at her,

[57] Hill was a civil rights movement veteran and leader in CORE before he succeeded Rustin as head of APRI. On his work, see here, here and here.

[58] For more on the campaign to integrate Rainbow Beach in which Velma Hill was injured, read here, here and here.

and it crippled her. She couldn't have children because of it. She paid her dues as an African American woman. She has a right to be able to speak up.

LJ: A lot of people don't know what Velma and Norm have done. Norm came to Baltimore, reorganized the APRI Baltimore chapter and made me president. He did this all over this country. Right now, I think APRI is in 50 states, or at least we are in almost every state. That's because of Norm. Norm followed the whole idea that integration could work; they believed that we could all work together. We didn't have to have separate organizations.

LJ: I used to love the white papers that Norm used to put out. Norman used to write religiously about our problems. Then he would send it out to the APRI chapters and tell us what we had to do in our communities. We used to do that stuff, on the off season, to prepare for election time. There were ideas of things to do that we could work with. Norm used to do all of that. We're glad to have Clayola [Brown],[59] but Norm really carried that institute and kept it alive for a long period after both Bayard and Mr. Randolph were gone.

LJ: Velma; I never figured Velma out. She was wonderful. The girl can give a speech. She can move you, but she never really believed in the paras. She never really wanted to be one. I made her one. When she left as the head of the NYC paras, she went on to get a graduate degree in psychology. That's what she does now. I'm not sure if she still sees patients around that, but I never figured out where she really wanted to go.

LC: One of the issues which was hot in the AFT at one point was the Vietnam war. There were a lot of arguments, because Shanker had a position that the union should stay neutral. There were lots of local leaders and teachers who were against the war. What was your impression at that time? What were your own views? What did you think about Shanker's position?

LJ: I don't think Shanker could be anything else but neutral, because the union would have been split wide open. Some in California and the Midwest and the West were totally against the war, and marched against it and so forth. I was also against the war, because of what I saw in my family. My nephew graduated from high school; I went to his graduation. But after his graduation,

[59] Brown is the current APRI president, the successor to Hill.

he had to go straight into the service. The next time I saw him, he had a machine gun hanging on him.

LJ: The next two times I saw him, he was home because he was wounded. But he was sent right back. I was not for the war. The Vietnam War was not a good thing for our African American men. We lost a lot of them and they came back with a lot of problems. Most of them came back and ended up on drugs, with no help from the Veterans Administration. Some of them had a lot of mental issues. The only thing we were able to do for some of our vets, those who wanted to come work in education—they got some money to become a teacher. But it was not a good time at all. I did not like the Vietnam War. I thought it was something to get rid of Black boys, because white people could send their children to Canada and they were doing that. The Blacks were being forced into the Vietnam War.

BB: You were a driving force behind the report, "Reclaiming the Promise of Racial Equity in Education, Economics and our Criminal Justice System," which provided a framework for policy and national and state legislation, at the school board level, and inside the AFT itself. Do you think that the goals were met by that report?

LJ: No. They have not been met. We started trying to meet them when our members started taking up and actually dealing with those issues in the locals. When I was going around to the different locals, where they have a civil and human rights committee, they were actually dealing with those issues. Beginning a conversation, this is what we need right now. What's going to happen when [Joe] Biden becomes president? Are we going to forget what happened to George Floyd?[60] Are we going to not deal with Black Lives Matter? Are we not going to have that conversation?

LJ: You know what I told Randi, when Randi Weingarten asked me to be chair of that committee, I said to her, "I don't want to be chair of another committee where we get a report and put it on a shelf. If we're not going to really do anything, then we don't need to have this committee." I said, "After the policies come out, I turn it over to you. You, as the president, have got to

[60] Johnson is referring to the May 2020 murder of George Floyd by Minneapolis police officer Derek Chauvin.

make this happen." She did. We started after that and developed the policies. We had a whole year of movement in our locals and we began to have open conversations more. And we were picking up that conversation more and more at other conferences, such as the Shanker Institute.

LJ: You talked about teacher diversity. You talked about having workshops around diversity and having a conversation, not with Black people, but with white folks. So, we're not finished. That was my fight with [AFL-CIO President Rich] Trumka. I was on a similar AFL-CIO committee and he watered down the reports. All the AFL CIO is going to do, from year to year, is check to see if their locals are still having conversations around diversity and what they found out and what was reported. They haven't even followed through on that. We forced them to put the Black Lives Matter sign if front of the AFL-CIO headquarters. That was forced. That wasn't something they wanted to do.

BB: It's wonderful, now there's a Black Lives Matter Plaza right in front of the AFL-CIO building.

LJ: Right. Exactly. No, we haven't finished, but we have a precedent that pushed active involvement. You remember, we did our civil rights conference and turned it over to the community, and they attacked Randi, but she accepted them. Those of us who can afford to be straight forward should speak up.

LJ: The fight is to have that conversation. Look, my committee met, they came out at six o'clock after meeting all day long and gave their report to the mediator who was there. She called them a lie. She said, "You didn't deal with this in any way." I'm sitting in my chair thinking, "Oh, Lord! How long am I going to have this job?" She sent them back. When they went back, that's when we got the policies and the report.

LJ: There were white folks in our own union who said, "I didn't know any Black people until I got involved in the union. Where I live, there are no Black people. Then I went to an all-white school. I didn't realize that Black folks did this. I saw on television. I just thought they deserved it." They were crying. We should have taped all of that stuff.

LJ: In my conference, they asked for an extra day by themselves. Randi gave it to us to get to those policies. We had one about police people and school security. One guy said that a boy came up to school with pants hanging down, and said, "I figured he didn't deserve my attention." Right? He said, "Then I got to know him differently. I just assumed that he was bad, because he let his pants hang down." So, the conversation was wonderful. We were honest with one another and we could say things to each other without anger. We made our people comfortable.

LJ: So no, and yes, to answer your question. We are far beyond where we started off, and we're going to try to do more. We started, but then everything has been on hold. Not because Randi wanted it, but because the pandemic happened. After that we have been fighting. We lost collective bargaining. We lost agency fee. We were faced with stuff that we had to focus on, so we couldn't keep that conversation going. But we do need to do that.

LJ: I worked with some Black judges. The judges have money. They don't know how to approach white judges who think it's okay to give Blacks very harsh sentences. Then they also want to deal with the fact that, under the federal law, there are mandates that say that even if you wanted to let the kid go, you can't. Mandates that say that you have got to give him seven years, 10 years, 12 years. They want to make changes in that, because the Black community doesn't trust the judicial system.

BB: And they shouldn't.

LJ: That's what they're trying to get to: How do we get the Black community to trust us again? When I worked with them, they were excited about what we had done. I told them how I did it. I said, "We are open to hear you. I'm not angry, because you tell me you don't know any Black people. Well, I wouldn't know any white people if I stayed in all Black area, right? So, is it okay for me to be say that, but it's not okay for you? But now when you know them, how do you make the assumption that I'm wrong and you're right? Or vice versa?" That has been the kind of picture we painted and pushed.

BB: What kind of policy changes do you want to see in the AFT?

LJ: Well, Randi has started. She wants to do more. The very first practice that the [AFT] departments and the department directors need to understand is that they represent everybody. You don't make assumptions. When I was Secretary-Treasurer, I got involved in a lot of grievances. I didn't have to, but I did because I was Black. A lot of the grievances were based on assumptions. The decision that was made was made because you didn't like me, but also because the worker was Black. But you make a different decision when it comes to a white person. I had to point out to the white person: why? When you say there are people out here that don't know they are racist, it is true.

BB: That's true.

LJ: That's very true. Then you have other conversations... like they sometimes came to me and made it all about race. They'd come to me with a grievance and I'd say, "Okay. So, what's racist about this?" "Oh, well, she's a white director," they'd say. I said, "Yeah, but the girl is wrong. Tell her she's wrong and let's not make a racial issue out of this." They'd go back speak to her and then came back again, "So, it worked." I said, "Yeah, because she was wrong. But then you were going to turn it into race, because the person that had to tell her was white and then she's not going to believe she's wrong. She's going to believe that it is racist." I said, "When it's racist, then you ought to say it. Say it to the supervisor, before you say it to the person."

LJ: If we could get enough of that, because if you remember in those training session afterwards, the Blacks were never satisfied that we did the diversity training, because of the problems they were having in their own departments. You've been in the department 20 years, doing all the work in the world. Anything you asked me to do, I did. Then all of a sudden you post a new job. And I'm thinking, I should get that job, right? Because I've been there 20 years and I've done it all, I've done everything that it says on that post, such as such and such, except I don't have a degree. Ergo, racism. Because I really didn't need a degree to do the job, but nobody wants to promote me.

LJ: That's the kind of stuff we've got to talk about and feel free to talk about. Can you explain why the degree piece is there? You might have a good explanation, but tell me what it is. Don't leave me and go hire somebody

white, when I've doing that job for 20 years. That is the kind of stuff we've got to continue to confront.

LJ: The policies I would like to see, which Randi is all for, is open policies. We need a diversity person there, that I can go and share the feelings I have. That diversity person could tell me whether I should have that feeling or not. Someone to talk to honestly with, because when we talk to each other, what we say, "You know you're Black, so that ain't going to happen. You know that."

LJ: Having the diversity piece that she's going to put there, it's going to be really good. It's going to be a good policy, because the diversity person goes straight to her. Not to the supervisor. The diversity person is a good person and understands what is happening and can go to the president and make a recommendation as to how this should move.

LJ: That's going to help a lot for people who believe, "Well, okay. Yeah. I had my say, but I still didn't get the job." I think when Randi puts that diversity person in there and gives them some freedom, that's really going to help a lot of the African Americans.

LJ: One of the problems we have, it's just like with the paras and the teacher. We have two units.[61] OPEIU is made up of secretaries and other kinds of support people. Then there's AFTSU, who actually looks like or is treated like they are professionals, versus a non-professional. The fight between the two units is trying to make sure that this one gets everything that the other one gets. That's impossible, because it's different work.

LJ: Randi's looking at that now. She's going to see how we can set policy that will not promote fighting between the two organizations. That's the policy I think we need right now.

LC: Lorretta, one thing we haven't talked about explicitly, but we've touched on it in very different ways, is that in 2008, you become an officer for the AFT.

[61] Johnson is referring here to the two staff AFT staff unions – an OPEIU local representing clerical and support staff, and an independent union (AFTSU) representing professional staff.

LJ: That was probably my biggest life moment. Randi asked me, actually she asked me to become the Secretary-Treasurer and actually take Nat's [LaCour's] position. I agreed. That was a moment in my life that I felt all that I had done, this was the reward. To become a national officer had never been in my mind. I sat on the board for over 30 years, being an executive board member, but never in my life had I thought I would become an officer. So, 2008 opened up a door for me that I didn't believe would happen.

LJ: When it did, at first I wasn't going to take it. A couple of the PSRPs in leadership said to me, "You have to take it, you have to, because you need to show that leadership can come from the PSRP unit." I said, "Okay." I was so enamored that Randi wanted me to be her Secretary-Treasurer.

LJ: Turned out, there was political stuff with the then Executive Vice President, who decided she wanted to move up. That didn't matter. I became the Executive Vice President rather than the Secretary-Treasurer. But look, what happened? Eight months later, I became the Secretary-Treasurer, finishing out her term. Then in 2010, I ran on my own as the Secretary-Treasurer.

LJ: It's what you look for in your lifetime, culminating something. I culminated a lifetime. I was 68 when Randy asked me to become the Secretary-Treasurer. At 68, I became a national officer. I didn't expect to be around 12 years, but that's how long I was around as an officer.

LJ: AFT has been my life. There's no doubt about it. I believed it. I live in it; I raised my children in it. The concept of democracy that AFT gave me. The constant civic duty that AFT gave me. The concept about life. AFT has been a family, rather than just a job. I've been a lucky woman to have been a part of that since 1970, up until now.

LC: One last question, and then we'll let you go. It is, what are you proudest of that you have accomplished as an AFT officer? When you look back at those 12 years and everything you've done, what makes you proud?

LJ: The contract that I produced for Baltimore, for the para-professionals and the leadership that I proved to AFT could come out of the para-unit. We've had wonderful leaders from all over the country, women who didn't know what

they wanted to do with their lives, who got involved in a union after hearing me in a speech. Or they came to one of our conferences and went back home and made us proud. Those are the people, to me, that culminate my belief in AFT and its leadership.

BB: Thank you so much, Lorretta, for talking to us.

LJ: This is wonderful for me. I need to remember where I came from and how I got there. This has been a wonderful conversation for me, because now... I had a wonderful marriage with my husband. I've been lucky with my three boys and I've been so grateful for what AFT has given me as a family all over the country.

LJ: When I go on Facebook, and something is said about me. I get 300 or 400 hits from people from all over the country. Some I don't even remember, but they remember me. I say to myself, "A job well done." That's when I say a job well done.

LC: Thank you very much.