

## A Lifetime in Labor Education and Filmmaking: *A Conversation with Julia Reichert*

By Gregory DeFreitas

Earlier this year, Julia Reichert and co-director Steven Bognar won the Academy Award for Best

Documentary with their powerful film *American Factory*. From real-time interviews with many workers and managers, it tells the riveting story of how their jobs and relationships changed when a shuttered auto plant in Dayton was reopened in 2016 as a glass factory run by a Chinese billionaire. In her acceptance speech at the Oscars, Reichert said:

“Our film is from Ohio and China. But it really could be from anywhere that people put on a uniform, punch a clock, trying to make their families have a better life. Working people have it harder and harder these days. And we believe that things will get better when workers of the world unite.”

After winning early praise at the Sundance Film Festival, the film attracted production support by the Obama’s new film company, Higher Ground. When the Oscar was announced, Barack Obama tweeted the winners:

“Congrats to Julia and Steven, the filmmakers behind American Factory, for telling such a complex, moving story about the very human consequences of wrenching economic change. Glad to see two talented and downright good people take home the Oscar for Higher Ground’s first release.” And Michelle Obama tweeted: “Congrats to Julia, Steven, and the whole crew on winning Best Documentary for #AmericanFactory, Higher Ground’s first release! So glad to see their heart and honesty recognized—because the best stories are rarely tidy or perfect. But that’s where the truth so often lies.”

Julia Reichert was born and raised in a small, conservative town near Trenton, NJ. She graduated from Antioch College in 1970, with a senior project that became her first successful film: *Growing Up Female*. After two years living in New York City, she settled in Dayton permanently in the mid-’70s. She taught for 28 years at Wright State University, often enlisting students in her film crews, building the media department and winning promotion to full professor before retiring for full-time filmmaking.<sup>1</sup>

Two of her earlier films, *Union Maids* (1978) and *Seeing Red* (1984), were also honored with Oscar nominations for her and longtime collaborator James Klein. Though now fighting cancer, she has completed a new film about the organizing movement among women clerical workers in her youth. On May 22,<sup>nd</sup> she spoke with Greg DeFreitas in a wide-ranging online interview.



Julia Reichert. (Credit: Eryn Montgomery)

**Q: I'd like to first ask about your new movie. I loved your first film, *Growing Up Female* -- made in the late sixties when you were still just a senior at Antioch. And now, a half-century later, you've filmed *9to5* on the women clerical workers organizing in the '60s. What was it that made you think of going back to that same time period?**

JR: Well, *Growing Up Female* was made in 1970. It comes out of my experience as a young woman getting into a consciousness-raising group and becoming involved in the women's movement. Once it came out in 1971, it was used heavily by the women's movement to kind of spread ideas, to have those little "Aha" moments that people would get watching the film.

But, don't forget, not much later in '76, we came out with a film called *Union Maids*. And that is three women who helped organize the CIO. So they got swept up, they became very good organizers, and they tell really good stories. And then in 1983 -- and all these took years to make -- we came out with *Seeing Red: Stories of American Communists*, which is also very much like the birth of a movement story. It really takes you through why people joined and what they did and what impact they had. And then it gets into, as older people look back, asking what difference did it make? What do you draw from it? What lessons are there for today?

So *Seeing Red* and *Union Maids* really gave me the experience and the interest in making *9t 5*, because I'm really interested in social movements and what difference they make and how they grow and how they learn. In *9to5* I wanted to make sure that it wasn't just kind of a "rah-rah" story, you know? That it asks questions. Why did their movement fail in this way? When did they lose confidence? When did they stay up at night, thinking, "What do we do now?"

**Q: The human side of it.**

JR: Yeah. Creating a movement or an action or a strike or whatever it might be is not a straight trajectory, and people have to realize that there are difficulties, bumps in the road. You've got to re-strategize, figure it out. Thinking about younger organizers today, I wanted to make sure that *9to5* offers that insight.

**Q: Didn't that organizing start with Karen Nussbaum in Boston? Did you spend time there to kind of embed yourself there the way you've done with your other films in Ohio?**

JR: Well, when you use the word "embed," I know what you mean. When you make an oral history film, it all happened years before. People are talking about what they remember happened. People are trying to recreate or remember the past. So there's more possibility to evaluate, to stand back and tell us the most important parts of what they learned, what the most crucial decisions were, what really drew them in, or what drew other people in that they were organizing.

So, yes, we went to Boston. Yes, we went to Atlanta. Yes, we went to Seattle. And actually, the original *9to5* movement was big in Ohio, in both Cleveland and Cincinnati. So we could drive to those places.

But it's not like *American Factory*, where the story is happening right in front of you, and you do embed, and you do go there every day, and you do say, "What's going on today?" And you go to the people you've built relationships with, and you talk to them on what's going on.

But it's very much embedding, yes, following the action. It's very hard with that kind of film to, like, evaluate, to stand back and say, "Well, what does this all mean? This is globalization. This is anti-union stuff. This is big stuff. Capitalism." It's very hard when you're making a film like *American Factory* or *The Last Truck*, which were both us following action every day. These are two different kinds of movies.

It's very difficult to stand back and have perspective. The best you can do, and really what you can offer as a filmmaker, is you try to be fair, you try to cover as much of the story and the people as you can. And you just try to like show up, show up, show up, show up. Let people see that you really mean it, that you really care, that you're really engaged, you're involved.

With an oral history film, you're asking people to sit in their room, much as you are right now, and think back on 30 years ago, you know, when they were 20, 25, 30. And they were going through this kind of thing. But now they can evaluate. Now they can step back and give you an idea of what it all meant and why it worked and why it didn't work. Does that make sense?

**Q: Yes, for sure. In terms of your own life, you've lived in Dayton since, what, the mid-'70s? Since you went to Antioch?**

JR: I went to Antioch and graduated in '70. We moved to Dayton in like '72. And actually, there was Dayton Women Working, which was like Cleveland Women Working. That kind of cropped up, but only for a couple years. I was not directly part of it, but I certainly knew about it and went to their demonstrations. I've been in Ohio since then.

**Q: As a New Yorker, I have to ask you: I read somewhere in an interview that you're a working-class girl from a small town. But there was a New York influence, because at Antioch you said that your roommate was a red-diaper baby from Long Island?**

JR: Well, you're a Hofstra teacher, so I guess you're right. Yeah, we lived in Bordentown, New Jersey, which is Exit 7. And we spent all the summers in our trailer at Long Beach Island. We were closer to Philadelphia. We rarely ever went to New York City. But my roommate Amy was a red-diaper baby. Her father was actually a jazz trombonist who gave it all up when Amy was born. It's a really interesting family, very Jewish family, secular. They were fantastic, and they introduced me to good movies and jazz and art and all kinds of things. And I would go to visit her. She was from Wantagh. So that's where I went to Jones Beach, you know.

**Q: Didn't you drop out of Antioch for a while and live in the Lower East Side of Manhattan? And, I think you once said you went to free MoMA screenings when you had a job in Manhattan.**

JR: On West 53rd Street, I had a job at a photo lab. And MoMA was one and a half blocks away. I lived on the Lower East Side on East 11th. I think it was 533 East 11th. And I also worked at the West End Bar near Columbia. And that was really interesting, to be there during the Columbia revolt as a kid who was serving Columbia students beer. You know, class is a very enduring fact in your life. It is; You don't get away from it. You think you can, but like there I am, serving beer, to all these Columbia students. I'm their age, and I'm an Antioch student. I happen to be a dropout, but as far as they're concerned, I'm the barmaid, or I'm the waitress.

And I try to listen to what they're talking about with the Columbia revolt and they would just like ignore me. You know what I mean? They were mostly men, in those days, talking. It was probably women there, too, but as I always say, I got put in my place. "Yeah, we're all in the movement together, but really, not if you're the barmaid."

**Q: Feminists hadn't made their real presence felt yet?**

JR: No. That was '68, right? So, no. It did have a huge impact, the women's movement, but it didn't happen until it happened.

**Q: Well, a few years after that, when I went to grad school at Columbia, my fiancée was fired for union organizing among the clerical workers. She got a job among the operators, and then she was hired as an organizer by District 65 [later part of UAW]. So I sort of saw that from the inside, the way clerical workers were badly treated. She later became a labor law professor. Your daughter, I understand, is in law?**

JR: My daughter is a labor lawyer, as is my son-in-law. He went to Northeastern, and she went to Harvard. They both had gone to Antioch, then they re-met in Boston and ended up together.

**Q: Talking about family, can I ask you about your parents? I know they were working class in a small Republican kind of town. How did they ultimately feel about your films?**

JR: Well, my dad didn't finish eighth grade, and comes out of a very strong German background. My grandpa, who I don't remember at all, never learned English, and he had a big family, three boys, three girls. Some of them were born in Germany, and some of them were born here. My dad was born here. He was in the Amalgamated Meat Cutters

and Butcher Workmen Union, which eventually became part of UFCW, and he actually was once a steward. I know we had some kind of strike at one point.

My mom actually cleaned hotels and stuff like that. But then, about 10 years after high school, she was encouraged to go to nursing school by my dad. She was very smart. After she died, we saw her report cards. She was in the National Honor Society, and got a lot of good grades, but she was like an orphan. Her mom died in the pandemic 100 years ago, so she only knew her until she was four or five years old. And her dad was an Irish alcoholic, I guess, who cleaned up in the schools as a janitor. She became a nurse at Princeton Hospital, which is not far from Bordentown.

So anyway, how did they feel? My dad died shortly after Kent State. The last thing we talked about was the students being shot at Kent State. We rushed home, because he had a heart attack, and we had a short conversation. He had always been, "These protestors were bad;" he was very much on that side. But my last conversation with him was that they shouldn't have shot those kids.

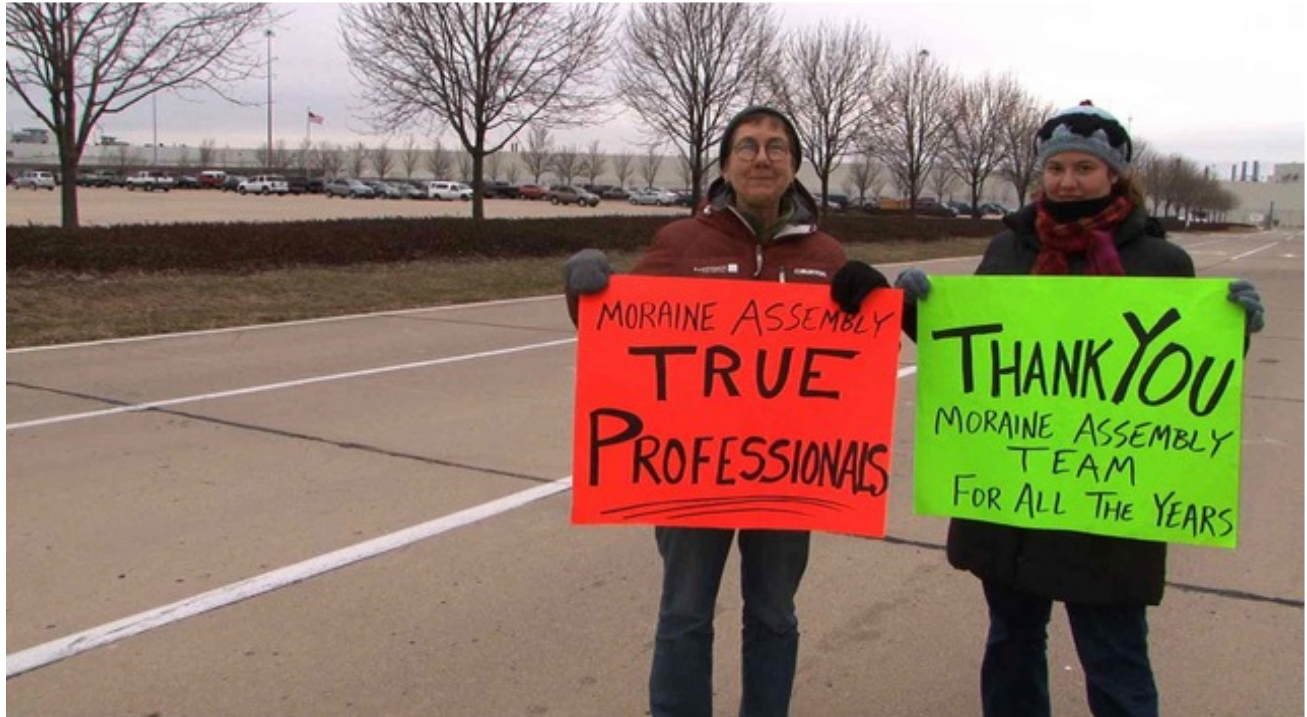
Gosh, we were just very Republican, and my mom naturally followed suit. She's the one who came to all our movie premiers. The significant thing, I think, is that she didn't really quite understand what we were doing, but she was proud. We needed money to finish *Growing Up Female*. We got to a point where we needed to pay the lab to make a new print, because they had made some mistakes, and we needed like \$1,200. We went to Jim's parents, who were upper-middle-class Long Island people in Lynbrook. His dad owned a shop on Sixth Avenue, like a notions store. They would not give it to us, because they felt like their son needed to stand on his own two feet. So we went to my mom, and she gave us her entire life savings, which was about \$1,250. And, you know, it's just one of those things. So that's how we were able to get the film out of the lab, *Growing Up Female*.

I always say, when I'm making a film -- this is true to this day -- that I have my mother over my shoulder. Because, when we're editing, I want to make sure that nothing we do she would not understand, that she would not be moved by or understand. And that's been a real important thing to me: to have my mother, and my brothers -- I have three brothers who are all like kind of working-class people -- and the people I grew up with kind of with me. I would never make something that they would feel looked down upon in, or they would not understand.

If you think about what I've done, I'm proud, but I think that's true. Even *Seeing Red*, a film about the Communist Party. I don't know if you've ever seen that film, but it's regular working-class people who got swept up in a movement for good reason. Anyway, my mom, I think, was proud.

**Q: And your brothers?**

JR: I have two brothers who are Republicans and one who's a Democrat. And they come to screenings. Yeah. I could go on about my brothers.



Julia Reichert and daughter Lela Klein outside doomed Dayton GM plant, during filming of *The Last Truck*. It was converted to the Chinese-owned glass plant of *American Factory*.

**Q: Let me ask you a little bit about your career as a teacher. You taught many years at Wright State?**

JR: Yeah, 28.

**Q: So you really helped shape the department there? While you're best known as a celebrated filmmaker, you also invested much of your life in teaching. And you joined UALE [United Association for Labor Education], which promotes labor education. So how would you say that your filmmaking informed your teaching, and vice versa? Were you teaching only undergrads, or did you teach older students, too?**

JR: Our program was strictly undergrad and small. We were able to fight to keep it small. When we came in, there was really not much of a production side. We teach production, not theory, so that's a big difference. There are theory teachers. They're very good, and they're very important to the students that we had and to their success in the world. But we teach production.

I did teach a little history here and there. I taught history of feminist film. I had a really good history class that I taught for about five years. I loved teaching that. But it was basically like stuff I had grown up with. And my friends who were filmmakers, I could get them on the phone, and we could talk to them and see their films and all that.

And when the union, AAUP, came to our campus in the last, I want to say, ten years of my work there, that made actually quite a difference, a good difference. The union got sort of beat down when Steve later became a teacher there. Just a few years ago, there was a big strike, and the union got beaten back somewhat. But, the union made a big difference in terms of faculty. We felt we had a seat at the table. It was not paternalistic. We were just sort of told what was going to happen with whatever it was, you know? Academic schedules and all kinds of things that related to our life. We were just sort of told, we were never asked.

But you know what it's like when you do have that seat at the table. It makes you more responsible, makes you feel more responsible, makes you feel more engaged. You can squawk if the benefits are not right, or the new hiring practices are not right, you can say something, you know? And they have to listen to you. It's like that woman says in *American Factory*, "If it's written down in a contract, they have to listen to us." The woman who says, "As a black woman, it's always better." It's the same thing with faculty.

You know, when I think about this question, I mostly think it was so great to have that wave of young people enter your life every year, and to see the culture as it was changing around us through their eyes. Because they make documentary films, they make personal films, they write scripts that are personal. We encourage that. We encourage them not to copy what you see on TV or copy what you saw Quentin Tarantino do, or whatever. But what stories do you have in your family, in your town, on your block?

So you really get a lot of insight into people's personal life, work life, spiritual life, family life. And it changed over time. And so I felt like their music tastes would change, their sense of taking risks would change. I remember, when I first tried teaching, a lot of my students were fundamental Christians and there were no radicals. I had to learn to be a



little careful. Not that I would be fired, but because I didn't want to alienate the students by making them feel that, because I'm a leftist and I believed in X, Y and Z, that them as Christian fundamentalists or as Republicans wouldn't trust me. It was more about that.

So I learned how to sort of see the world from their point of view, from the point of view of fundamentalist Christians or of people whose parents were very poor, or people whose parents were addicts. We started having all these kids whose parents were addicts and alcoholics. That was another phase.

A really huge change came, because generally we didn't have people who were politically engaged. But a huge wave of people with the first Obama years, with the election coming up, all these people were swept into it and were fired up and got involved. And some of those kids are some of our best filmmakers now out in the world. They really got involved. So I could see them go through all the different things that we went through.

Even the change in women. Like we had zero women students for a long time, and certainly zero women students who really saw themselves as directors, for years. And the women characters in the films were like the girlfriend, you know. But it really started shifting in recent years, and now there's like probably more women than men. Well, you know what? It's shifted back again. I was at a meeting recently, and there were like all these white men. So something happened there.

But it started being at one point like there were very strong women. The stories were written by women. They were about women. Women were behind the cameras. Women were directing, which, in much of my time, was very rare. That's some kind of cultural thing, too, I think, with maybe the #MeToo movement. I'm not sure.

So that was a great thing about being a teacher: great, great insights you get into what's going on in the world. Plus, you know, you could also say, "Well, I had health insurance. I had a child growing up. You know, I had the whole summer off." Man, I would plan my time. You probably do it, too. Easter vacation, Christmas vacation, those dates went in my calendar at the beginning of the year. It's like, okay, that's when I could travel and do interviews, or that's when I could really focus on editing. The whole summer was completely packed with work on films. Because, you know, we made films the whole time we were teaching, just at a slower pace.

**Q: And would you use students sometimes to help out?**

JR: Oh, yeah. Totally. You know the kids: you know who's good. You know who's going to show up. And you know who's going to be good on a crew, who's got the skills or who's got the temperament. So absolutely, all the films are just littered with students.

And actually, some big films. I don't know if you ever saw some of the Todd Haynes films that -- or John Sayles films that have shot in Ohio, like *Carol* A beautiful, great film, very highly regarded, shot in Cincinnati. And like a quarter of the crew are my former students.

**Q: So let me ask you the classic question. Filmmaking's very, very, competitive, and very expensive. So when the young student comes to you and asks, "Should I become a filmmaker?" what kinds of answers did you give?**

JR: We get that question a lot. There's a big winnowing process that goes by at our school. First year, second year. You go from 100 kids in a class to 25, and then I get like 12. So there's a big winnowing process. I get the ones that are a little more serious, or made it through.

Well, I usually try to tell them how hard it is. It's a very hard profession, no matter if you're fiction or nonfiction. And it becomes your life. It's never like a 9-to-5. Hardly any jobs in film or TV are 9-to-5, or are predictable. And you have to really love it. You have to really, really feel a passion for it.

I also tell them, as they get a little bit older, "Make sure you have a salable skill." So you don't have to work at a coffee stand or a waitress, although a lot of them do, of course. But if you have a salable skill -- maybe you want to be a director. Maybe you think you're a writer. Maybe you want to be a cinematographer. But know how to take sound, right? Know how to book flights so that you can work in the office, in the production office, booking flights and getting meals together. Know how to have a salable skill so that you can get on set or get in the business and learn from there.

**Q: I'm really interested in your life as an educator, because it's been such a big part of your life. I was thinking, since you're such a master storyteller with your movies, that in UALE popular education is what we all try to do. A lot of it is about listening to students and getting their stories from the first day of the class. I think that's one reason why films like yours are so useful; you're doing that sort of thing. I remember that you're actually seen in *Seeing Red*, at the very beginning, interviewing?**

JR: Yeah, we showed that.

**Q: Yeah, you conducting that dialogue. That was really interesting, and probably useful for teaching with students, too, to see how you were actually doing it right there in the film. But that you were trying to keep perspective. So it's definitely you as this separate entity from the interviewees.**

JR: Well, there's a reason for that. You actually also see us in *Union Maids* a little. In *Seeing Red*, we decided that I'm the go-between. These people are vilified and written out of history, as bad as baby-rapists, communists, right? Well, I'm the one younger, not of their generation, curiously saying, "Tell me why you did this. Tell me what you did." I'm like the interpreter for the audience. If I were not present, you wouldn't know if they're talking to another person of their age, to a historian, to what. So you see who I am. You know, you feel my presence. In that film, that was important. It isn't as important, I don't think, in *9to5*. I mean, you do get little glimpses of me, and you hear a question here and there. Maybe that's a mistake. But I'm of their generation, right?

**Q: In *Seeing Red*, how did you locate the people? Did Amy, your old roommate help out at all? How did you decide who to approach?**

JR: Honestly, our jumping-off points were the three people in *Union Maids* who, unbeknownst to us, were all members of the Communist Party! We're just complete idiots that we missed that. So they helped. They were all in Chicago, so they helped us.

We had a couple of Antioch friends whose parents were red-diaper babies. In one of the first interviews, the woman who says, "Tough shit." "What would you say if people find out?" Because, you know, people were not ready to talk about it yet. A lot of people would say no because of fear for their children. I mean, those two, they're in Cleveland. They're the Grays, and their son was a student at Antioch a little older than us. He introduced us. And we asked them, "What if your neighbors find out you'd been communists?" Like, nobody knew. She says, "Well, tough shit." And they laugh, and it's great that they say that. So they helped us.

We were in an organization called New American Movement, which was a real bedrock for me as far as having cultural workers like me from all over the country. We had a little cultural workers' caucus kind of thing that met informally. Of course, you have study groups and you have action groups, and we had a big chapter in Dayton. It was 30 or 40 people, a big chapter that met like every week. It was way different than DSA, which it later became. Anyway,

there were a few people there. Dorothy Healey was part of NAM. Her son Richard was a leader in NAM, so that's how we met Dorothy Healey.

But I will say that when we started, it was always that one person would vouch for us and suggest somebody else, and we would go talk to them on the phone and go meet them at their apartment or their house or whatever. They would always interview us first. They would sit us down. We were like late 20s, 30, I think, maybe early 30s, and they're like in their 60s, right? They're like our age now, or even older. And they would sit us down and say, "Why are you doing this, and who else have you talked to, and what's your goal with this, and where is going to go?" And, you know, the fact that we had made *Union Maids* and everyone had seen it, right, of those folks, that really made a huge difference, because they could tell what side we were on, and they saw we knew how to make a movie.

**Q: And you were very respectful to the women you were interviewing, clearly.**

JR: Yeah, we just sat in our seat and had them tell their stories. And it was more challenging with *Seeing Red*. We challenged them more than we did the union maids. It was a totally different kind of film. We were really trying to give lessons to our fellow New Lefters in New American Movement. Most of us were in some group or other. And I felt we had a lot to learn from those people, what they did right, and what they did not right.

**Q: Can you give a hint of what you're working on now, what the next project is beyond *9to5* ?**

JR: Oh, after that? Man. I'm 73, and I'm a cancer survivor. I have active cancer, actually. So what we're working on right now is the pandemic happening all around us. We're in like small-town, small-city Ohio. And so my every instinct is, "This is important. We've got to cover this." But I can't leave the house, basically. So we gathered together some of these younger students who live in this area and who are good and have kept working in film. We're helping open doors; we're helping produce. But they're actually going out and shooting, right? So that's what we're working on.

It's really for history. I mean, I don't know if it's going to be a film or what it's going to be. I don't know. But it's like, this is one of those that's happening all around us. I'm just trying to catch a hold and capture what we can.

**Q: Locally, in the Dayton area, or beyond?**

JR: Totally in the Dayton area. It's nothing you can't drive to. And like the homeless shelters. We can't go into the emergency rooms. People trying to figure out what to do when the gowns and masks are diverted to hotspots like New

York, you know. What do we do? We don't have gowns for our nurses. We're Ohio inventor types, so they figured it out. And we documented that whole thing, of figuring out how to make and produce and manufacture gowns. That's one of the stories.

Then there's the farmers -- a farmer called me back this morning -- who are having problems. What do they do with all these extra eggs? The milk prices are down. I mean, I could go on, but they're covering these stories. That's what we're doing. As far as the next project, I don't know.

You know, something you said, I want to go back to. As a teacher, I have them for the whole year. I'm lucky that way. The first day of class, I go around -- or even if it takes two days -- and have each person tell their story. You coax them along with like, "What do your parents do? Where did you grow up? What kind of high school did you go to? What kind of student were you? How did you get interested in film? When did you first see a film?" And each person talks about it. And I view it as like, first of all, I'm learning about them. But they're learning about each other, and you're sort of building this sense of a community. And that's for all of us.

That's why I can call upon my students now. They might have graduated ten years ago, and they'll be like, "Yeah, let's get together." Because we tried to build that sense that we are a community, right? We're going to critique each other's work. We're going to be on each other's crews. We're going to work together after we finish school. So we start that on the very first day. And you could do that in any field, really.

**Q: So you build what could be called social capital with them, in a sense, that you have experience with them, there's trust.**

JR: Yeah.

**Q: The same with a lot of the people you interview, right? Are you still in touch with people years and years in the future? Do they keep you up on what they're doing?**

JR: Yeah, we keep in touch. In *A Lion in the House*, which we made 12 years ago, all the white people in that film were Republicans, and all the black people were Democrats. That doesn't come up in the film at all. But one Republican family we keep in touch with, and one of the African-American families we keep in touch with. That was 12 or 13 years ago.

*The Last Truck* a couple of them are actually in *American Factory*, so we definitely keep up with the people in *American Factory*. The communists have all passed on, as far as I know. Of course, the union maids we kept close to for a long time. My daughter, I think, became a union organizer before she went to law school because of one of the three union maids, Stella.

**Q: I always wanted to know what happened to Stella.**

JR: Well, Stella became a clerical worker at the University of Chicago and was head of the organizing campaign there. And so she was the older one who kind of knew how to organize a meeting and knew how there had to be an organizing committee, you know, like what it was like to have an organizing committee and all that. I think she was on the bargaining committee, too. But my daughter, for some reason, really bonded with her, and she was like her second grandma. I honestly think it really inspired her to devote her life to the labor movement.

**Q: You know, one thing about the interviews with Stella: when I show *Union Maids* in my classes, we assign Upton Sinclair's *The Jungle*. And Stella worked in meatpacking, so it's a perfect fit. And it also, of course, brings in feminism and the broader issues with the 1930s. So it's a perfect bridge from 1906 to the New Deal.**

JR: Yeah. She was great. All three of them, but especially Stella. Vicky (Vicky Starr, her real name) became a big part of our life. Yeah, she was actually the preacher at our wedding when Jim and I -- we had a real wedding, but it was a celebration. We said, "We're not going to invite the church or the state into our relationship."

And so Vicky was the officiant, and she said, "Do you agree to bargain in good faith?" I mean, she made the whole thing like that, our wedding, you know? "Do you agree to be equal?" It was very nice.

**Q: What year was that, can I ask?**

JR: Gosh, that would have been in the late '70s. So Lela was born in '79, so it was '77, '78, something like that.

**Q: Your daughter still lives near you, is that right?**

JR: She and Bobby and the two kids live in Dayton, yeah. They lived in D.C. She was part of the organizing drive at Cornell when the UAW was organizing grad students. She was hired there. She went to the training that they do for young people coming into the labor movement, the OI. She worked at SEIU, coming out of law school. She got an internship for two years in the legal department, and Bobby worked at one of those law firms that's labor-side. He graduated a year after her. They had the baby, Beau, who's now going to turn ten next month.

So she worked at SEIU for two years. She loved it. She loved that and that was a woman-run department. She learned so much. She loved the people she worked with. But two jobs came open in Dayton. You know, they didn't want to live in D.C. And so Bobby became a staff attorney, Bobby is now with IUE-CWA, and he just got promoted to general counsel. And Lela worked for the IUE-CWA. And she went on to become the general counsel, and she was the youngest general counsel. She was like in her early, mid-30s.

But now she works in the worker co-op movement. She's the one who taught me about Mondragon. And Cincinnati is big for worker-owned co-ops. They've worked three years now on forming a worker-owned co-op grocery store. They broke ground in January. They raised \$4 million for Dayton, Ohio, which is amazing. She decided not to be part of the union movement per se. But she still wants to work for power for working-class people.

**Q: What about writing? You're incredibly busy, I know. But have you thought about writing books, not just about your life, but about filmmaking, or your approach to filmmaking?**

JR: Well, Steve and I put together a really good hour-and-a-half sort of PowerPoint, which we've done a number of times. We never wrote a book, but we could do that for a class, and we've done that even for big classes, small classes. I like doing that. So we do like this two-hour thing.

I did write a book way back when. It was the first book on how you distribute films independently. And it was the basis of my experience in New Day Films. It's called *Doing it Yourself*. That was before we had that phrase, "doing it yourself." It came out in the mid-'70s, I imagine.

I wanted to show you something in my office here, which I find it pretty cool. Do you see there's like this long sheet of paper, with lines on it? It goes all the way around. That is the timeline of *9to5*. And it was a great idea. It has three lines: the first line is national dates; the third line is specifically *9to5* dates; and the middle line is sort of movement dates. Here's 1972, we're looking at. So, Nixon in China, 1972. In the movement, Title IX is passed. *Ms.* magazine debuts. In *9to5*, the Harvard office workers group is formed, and the first *9to5* newsletter came out. So that it's really helpful in trying to think about their impact on history and to have a ready reference to know what was going on the world, as well as what was going on in their movement. So I'm kind of proud of that, and it ends in 2016. That's because we thought the film would be done in 2016, which didn't happen.

**Q: You did have a few screenings of the film just before COVID hit, is that right?**

JR: We had a lot of test screenings, and they were very helpful. Like we had one or two with UALE, and we had a few with LAWCHA. And we had them with just regular folks around here in Ohio. The finished film was set to have its world premiere at *South by Southwest*, which of course was cancelled. So we've been kind of sitting on it. We are going to have our world premiere in June. A lot of the film festivals are going to strictly online. And you have to buy a ticket, so it's not downloadable online. It's like you have to be one of 400 people who buys a ticket. You know, it's online for just one day.

That's going to be in mid-June. And then we got invited to a ton of other festivals. So it's going to be showing like on Long Beach Island, where I grew up! They're having a drive-in festival, where it actually will be in-person. And a bunch of other festivals through the fall and into the winter.



Karen Nussbaum leading Boston clerical workers' organizing drive, 1973.



**Q: And the distributors, the HBOs and the like, did they wait to look at the reaction at such festivals typically, and then they sign on?**

JR: You know, typically, yes. But all of us are dealing with this in our little part of the world, filmmaking. Typically, they would all be at *South by Southwest* or wherever, and they would see what's hot and what's good, and then they would make an offer. Now none of that's happening. What everyone has had to settle in and realize, after a month or so went by, is that they're going to have to choose films without the benefit of an audience reaction, or even press.

Or they're going to have a film like ours, that's going to go into an online festival. It will get reviewed. You know, that's the world right now. Reviewers are going to see the films not with an audience, but at home, which they often do anyway.

It's all a whole new world for us, like how to get our films out into the world, and how does the whole system work, which was very dependent upon public screenings. Right? DOC NYC, they want to show the film, but is it going to be online? Is it going to be in theaters? It's in November. We still don't know. They don't know. So that whole system that was set up, you know, the public screenings, the buzz, the reviewers... it's very different now. So far, though, the reaction to *9to5*, I would cautiously say, has been really positive.

**Q: UALE has its next conference with LAWCHA, in Chicago next year. So certainly, that'd be wonderful, if we could show *9to5* then, as well. I'm sure people would love it.**

JR: The film is finally finished. Did you guys have your conference about two years ago in Seattle? In connection with the Pacific Northwest Historians?

**Q: Yes.**

JR: Well, I remember that was just before I got really sick, like literally that was when I got really sick. It was April 4th, 2018, and it was a screening we had for UALE and the Pacific Northwest people. As it happens, two or three of the people in the film were there, because they're members. It seemed like at least 100 people, and it was such a positive, hopeful reaction, really great. And from then on, I was in the hospital, starting like the next day. Really, the big turnaround. But that I remember really clearly.

And the film's changed a lot since then. It's gotten a lot better. UALE and LAWCHA have been very gracious in terms of setting up these test screenings with discussion, very, very helpful.

**Q: This past summer, my university for the first time hosted the annual UALE Northeast Women's Union Summer Program. It was the first time I'd ever glimpsed one, and it was so exciting and so inspiring to me. It was very cinematic, you know? Just rousing, with hundreds of women.**

JR: Yeah, I actually went to one of those, and that was one of my test screenings. It was the one in western Massachusetts, like the summer before last, I think. It was the Northeast UALE. They have the East, Midwest and West, right? I went the whole time, and it was incredibly inspiring. I really agree. There were probably 150 or more women there, all like active union people. And of course, Kim Cook, one of the people in our film, was one of the faculty. She teaches at Cornell in New York City. She comes out of *9to5*. It was so inspiring, and I have tons of pictures. I would love to go to every single one of those. I mean, for me -- like for *me*. You hear how beaten down people are in the working class and the labor movement and all that, but you don't feel that in those rooms. I actually think there's a big turnaround in recent years within the union movement.

**Q: How so?**

JR: It's funny, I reflect on this. I forget if it was in the early days of Trump or before, just before. Kim Cook and I were at one of my very first events. Like either UALE or LAWCHA. It was in Detroit. And honestly, she looked out, and she said, "You know, in ten years there won't be anything like this anymore. It'll be over." Meaning, you know, this whole coming together of labor educators, working-class people, unions was going to fade out. There wouldn't be support for it.

That may be true, but I get the feeling -- particularly when we're out there working with *American Factory* and the union movement, the AFL-CIO, some of the unions -- that the old leadership is turning over. There are new people coming in. There's more of a sense of groundswell from the bottom up. There's more of a sense of new kinds of workers are getting interested or realizing how exploited they are. I think our film has been a tiny part of that, that awareness. So it's actually a really exciting time. And even like five years ago, it was not so much. Do you notice that?

**Q: I do, and I especially notice it with young people.**

JR: Yeah.

**Q: And I think that this crisis, if history's any indicator, will push even more people in that direction.**

JR: You know, I was talking with a business school teacher, of our generation. And he remembers teaching kids who all wanted to go to Wall Street and make a ton of money and have gorgeous apartments in Lower Manhattan, right? That was their whole goal. He said, "It's different now. This is the generation that came of age after '08, after the economic crash. They came of age with Occupy Wall Street, with the climate crisis, and they want to have that triple bottom line. They want to be aware of like the needs of workers, the needs of the environment." He said, yes, there's been a real shift over the many years he's taught. I don't know if you've seen that?

**Q: Yes, and they're all scared to death of climate change. And I think that cloud over their heads is making people reassess things long term, even what kind of companies or organizations they want to work for.**

JR: Companies they want to be leaders of eventually. Yeah, that's really positive. It isn't just, we have to be better to our workers, but workers have to have actual power, right? A seat at the table. Not just like, "Well, we'll make sure you get a living wage, or we'll make sure things are safe." That's really good, but: "We're going to have you on the board of directors with enough people that you could sway decisions. We're going to have committees of workers that actually have teeth." Right? Power -- my daughter always says this: "You know, what needs to change is the power relationships." Do the changes we're in favor of actually change the power relationships between the owner and the worker? Not just more of a benign attitude, which is good, but it's like a Band-Aid.

**Q: Well, on that positive note, I'm going to let you go. You've been so kind. Thank you.**

JR: Sure. I'm going to get back out in my garden. It hasn't rained yet.

---

*Gregory DeFreitas is Professor of Economics at Hofstra University and director of the Center for Study of Labor and Democracy. He is also the University Representative on the National Executive Board of the United Association for Labor Education (UALE).*

*REGIONAL LABOR REVIEW*, vol. 22, no.2 (Spring/Summer 2020).  
© 2020 Center for the Study of Labor and Democracy, Hofstra University

---

<sup>1</sup> Like other university faculty, she was a union member, represented by AAUP. In 2019, Wright State faculty drew national attention when their union mounted an unusually long and bitter three-week strike that successfully fought off an imposed contract that would have stripped them of health care bargaining rights.